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MARCONI TROPOSPHERIC SCATTER SYSTEM AND SOUTH AFRICA

The British Government has just decided (25 October) to grant an export licence to Marconi Communication Systems Ltd., approving the supply of 20 terminals of tropospheric scatter communications equipment to the South African Armaments Board. The British government has argued that this equipment falls outside the arms embargo applied against South Africa. A close reading of the application submitted by Marconi together with other documents they have prepared refutes this claim. In fact, the Government has responded to the immense pressures which have been applied by GEC-Marconi in apparent close co-operation with the South African government. It is a sad reflection on the present government that while South Africa is massively extending its military machine that the go-ahead should be given to a contract which will greatly extend the capability of the South African defence forces. It is important to note that the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly on 9 November to condemn Britain for continuing to assist in the arming of the apartheid regime.

The Contract:

In December 1975 the first reports appeared in the British press that Marconi had been awarded a contract to supply Tropospheric Scatter Communications Equipment to the South African Armaments Board. It was alleged that the Equipment was to be used in Namibia - where the South African defence forces are involved in a war against the liberation movement of Namibia - SWAPO. There were numerous protests against the contract both inside and outside parliament. Despite representations to the Ministries involved no satisfactory response was forthcoming and so on 22 April the Anti-Apartheid Movement published a special report entitled 'Marconi Arms Apartheid'. In this report we set out detailed information about the Equipment and how it fitted into South Africa's military build-up in Namibia. Against the background of these protests the Government announced on 29 April that Tropospheric Scatter Equipment would in future require an Export Licence before being exported since existing Export Control Regulations did not cover such equipment.

Marconi's Response:

Marconi management immediately responded. Sir Arnold Weinstock, head of GEC-Marconi, wrote personally to Prime Minister Callaghan and they secured the support of Conservative MP, N. St. John-Stevas, who described opponents of the contract as 'fanatics' and also of Labour MP, B. Ford, a former Marconi employee. More significantly they prepared a special memorandum which was circulated to Trade Union officials on 14 May which sought to portray the contract as a normal civil contract and argued that the fact that the Armaments Board were the purchasing agency arose 'purely from administrative arrangements of the South African government'. However, their main argument was that redundancies would result from the cancellation of the contract.

On 8 June, Marconi Communications Systems Ltd. submitted an export licence application to the Department of Trade. A detailed reading of the application confirmed our worst fears. The South Africans planned to install 10 links i.e. 20 terminals (five in South Africa, four in Namibia and one bridging these two areas). In the application great emphasis was laid on the use of tropospheric scatter systems for civilian communications systems and that the South African system would not have certain features normally expected on military systems. Nowhere in the application, however, was it denied that the South African Defence forces would use the system. In fact in explaining why the contract was with the Armaments Board they referred to a South African government decision that the Army would be responsible for communications in lowly populated areas - areas presumably not normally requiring sophisticated communications equipemt for military purposes. Also the application refers to interfaces with the South African Post Office Network to 'facilitate the civilian use of the tropospheric scatter network'. The only interpretation of this statement can be that it is a military communications system in which some channels are available for civilian use. Marconi do not usually present their Tropospheric Scatter Equipment as civilian equipment. At the Aldershot British Army Equipment Exhibition in June, they proudly announced that their 'long and wide experience with all forms of radio communication, including Tropospheric Scatter, places it (Marconi) in a unique position for the planning and implementation of large defence systems.

The Amended Export Licence Application

Pressure on the Government to refuse an Export Licence, however, continued but then on 21 July, in a surprising move Marconi informed the Government that the application for an export licence was to be amended. Apparently 'the South African government has now decided that all fixed communications within South West Africa (Namibia) shall become the responsibility of the South African Post Office who will then provide any necessary circuits for military users. As a consequence the South African Armaments Board has decided to redeploy all the equipment covered by this export licence application to provide services within the Republic'.
Thus, very conveniently, the South Africans attempted to remove a major objection to the system, namely that it was to be installed in Namibia whilst at the same time creating a situation whereby any future order for such equipment to be installed in Namibia would come from the Post Office thus giving the appearance that it would be for civilian use. Assuming of course that the South Africans do not simply obtain the equipment and then install it in Namibia without informing the British government.
This change in the order was apparently sufficient to persuade the Department of Trade that an Export Licence should be granted. From the evidence it is obvious that this amendment in the application was brought about following consultations between the South African authorities and Marconi. It is It is difficult to expect that officials from the Department of Trade were not kept informed of these negotiations.

Marconi's Stake in Apartheid

Underlying all these developments between Marconi and the Department of Trade has been the continued threat of redendancies at the Chelmsford Plant if the Export Licence was not granted. The Marconi management have pointed

to the £100 million worth of contracts which GEC have received during the last twelve months principally from the South African government and its agencies. Failure to secure an Export Licence would, they state, result in retaliatory action. Thus Marconi's and indeed GEC's strategy to build up its investment and trade with South Africa creates a situation in which British workers can effectively be intimidated with threats of redundancies into supporting their management in its policy of collaboration with the apartheid regime.

But the power of retaliation does not rest solely with the South African government. Marconi has dismissed suggestions that proceeding with the contract would damage relations with other customers by implying that countries 'like Nigeria, Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Oman' had no objections. But in May this year the Nigerian Foreign Minister warned multinationals against their continuing supply of military equipment to South Africa. He added ' It will be either South Africa or the rest of Africa. As long as pressures remain unheeded, retaliation will have to be considered against individuals and transnationals who want to have their cake and eat it'.

Conclusions:

The AAM rejects the Marconi claim that the contract is of no military significance. It is difficult to believe that a system which was originally considered to be of military use to the regime in Namibia and South Africa is now, somehow, transferred into one of entirely civilian use simply because it is claimed to be destined for South Africa only. The international arms embargo applies to equipment destined for use in South Africa as well as Namibia.

The AAM is shocked at the apparent ease with which Marconi has been able to secure a licence from HMG simply by reformulating the original contract, particularly since Government policy has been repeatedly stated to be firmly in support of an international arms embargo against South Africa.

The AAM believes that maximum pressure must be exerted on the British government so that it pursues a policy which prevents the South African defence forces from receiving any equipment which can enhance its military capacity and therefore

a) the export licence for this equipment should immediately be rescinded
b) no future licences should be granted for such communications equipment (in particular for Namibia and for the £20 million contract for mobile equipment for which Marconi are reported to be tendering)

In view of this Marconi contract and various other loopholes in the operation of the British arms embargo which have been revealed by the AAM this year we believe that a parliamentary enquiry should be established to investigate the implementation of the arms embargo.

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