

General Motors in South Africa: Secret Contingency Plans "in the event of civil unrest"

by Jennifer Davis
May, 1978

In mid-May two important memos from the General Motors Corporation, previously secret, were obtained by the American Committee on Africa. One was dated May 6, 1977, the other July 20, 1977. Thus they are a year old, but very current. They outline General Motors' contingency plans to be put into effect "in the event of civil unrest" and reveal clearly the close identity of interests between the South African government and a major U.S. investor.

General Motors has over \$150 million invested in two plants in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. In 1977 it employed 1,744 whites, 1,464 Coloureds and 432 Africans. In May 1977, following the nationwide expansion of black resistance initiated by the uprising in Soweto, the then managing director of GMSA, W. C. Mott, forwarded to D. Martin, regional director for Africa in the U.S., a summary outlining the background and the basic plant protection measures relevant to GM South African, in the event of civil unrest. In a signed covering memo addressed to Martin, Mott pointed out:

"The action plan has not yet been tried out in full since there has been no need to adopt it. To avoid focussing attention on it, we are approaching this entire matter on a low key but maintain close liaison with the Civil Defense authorities. Many management personnel have been briefed on the overall pattern of control and there is close cooperation between companies in the industrial areas."

Attached to the contingency plan were some "Related Assumptions" and "Comments" which provide a useful background to the corporation's thinking.

To preserve secrecy, the package was hand delivered from South Africa to Detroit.

On July 20, 1977 L. H. Wilking, the new GMSA managing director sent a further memo and the outline of a second contingency plan to Martin. The basic contents of the two plans appear very similar; we summarize and excerpt significant sections from both plans and from the company's comments below.

(Note: Unless specified, all quotations are from the first document forwarded May 6.)

Introduction

This points out that South African industry "is poorly prepared to handle industrial disruption and civil unrest" so that

"the task of containing any such action is vested in the South African Police with the tacitly acknowledged availability of military support should a situation warrant it."

Without commenting on the obvious link to growing black militancy in the face of intensifying repression, the plan reports that under the

"Civil Defence Act of 1966 control centers and organizations have been established in urban areas and a basic communication network exists and is being further developed.

"Industries or services designated as National Key Points by the National Key Point Committee will be accorded protection in emergencies through the medium of the Citizen Force Commando system. Within the concept plant personnel who have had military training and who still have training commitments to meet are encouraged by the authorities to volunteer to join a local commando unit. One or more

such units would, for example, have responsibility for the respective General Motors' plants.

"As all White male South African citizens up to age 65 years are liable for military service in terms of the Defence Act a Reserve call-up would supplement these citizen force units in a case of national emergency.

"Thus the 'GM Commando' would assume guarding responsibility for the GM plants and would fall under the control of the local military authority for the duration of the emergency. It is envisaged, for example, that plant personnel could be engaged in a composite function, i.e., part normal work and part guard duty in such situations.

"It should be noted that in terms of the S. A. Defence Act as presently written, compulsory military service is applicable only to White male citizens. The concept of utilizing plant personnel in a dual function is related to the fact that key skills, technical and managerial expertise are concentrated in the same population group from which defence requirements must be drawn."

GM makes it clear that it believes any period of civil unrest will involve a conflict between black and white, in which company interests will be the same as those of the whites—who will thus logically provide both civilian, police and military security in the plant.

In its own "Related Assumptions" GM says quite bluntly:

"It is assumed that almost 100% of White employment at GMSA would not be party to creating or stimulating civil unrest and that the population groups would be African and Coloured." "The White employee group would not be party to such action and could be relied on to take action to contain it . . . pending the arrival of law enforcement authorities."

Continuing with an expression of frank racism, GM concludes its "Assumptions" section by assuring its U.S. parent that blacks in South Africa are unlikely to sustain their struggle for any length of time because they traditionally "lack purpose." As for the degree of repression that might be involved in crushing the people's actions—GM chooses to refer to this euphemistically as "strict social sanctions."

Key Point Status

The importance of GM to the maintenance of the current South African system is revealed by the designation of GM facilities as National Key Points under the government's "overall contingency plan" within the framework of the Civil Defence Act No. 39 of 1966.

According to GM, such designation means that in periods of emergency the South African government would take over all responsibility for the security of the plant. It is already supervising security standards on a day to day basis. The company reports that it is collaborating fully with the authorities in designing such security arrangements.

"The security rating at both locations is indicated as being 70% of desired standard. Surveys have been carried out at both plant locations by the authorities and it is expected that recommendations to bring the security rating up to 100% will follow shortly.

"It is indicated that as the proposed level is not unreasonable and in the best interests of the company, these will be carried out as a matter of self interest."

Basic Plant Protection Plan

Based on what it terms "self help action in the event of civil unrest or industrial interruption assuming emergency proportions" the plan is designed to deal with three possible situations: day shift plant operation, partial occupancy of premises and almost vacant plants.

"Objectives—

1. To protect lives and property;
2. To preserve the organizational structure; and
3. To assure continuity or the early resumption of production."

The section proceeds with a vulnerability analysis pointing out external weaknesses such as the

"Close proximity of the Kempston Road Plant to the non-white townships" and the large number of ex-employees, and unemployed with a sound knowledge of factory layouts. Internal weaknesses include "lack of identification of employees—(identity cards issued but not of the pin-on visible type)" and the accessibility of water supplies, communications and data processing."

The "Action Plan" outlined makes it clear that while GM will activate internal personnel, it will rely for primary protection on what it politely terms the "law enforcement authorities."

Actions to be taken "in the event of a direct threat to GM South African plants" include:

- "1. Close all gates and foyer entrances and regulate traffic . . . ;
- "3. Arm Security Staff . . . ;
- "5. Maintain a detachment of Security staff at the Control Center with transport and dogs to act as directed in order to protect lives and property . . . ;
- "7. Alert by whatever means available all Plant Protection staff not on duty, S. A. Police, Civil Defence, Fire Services and Management as per priority listing."

International Service Personnel

The plan makes provision for protecting and possibly evacuating foreign nationals, in co-ordination "with that of the appropriate national representatives" and points out that:

"In the Port Elizabeth area there is a fairly significant American community and tentative contacts have already been established for the purpose of co-ordinating action in the event that a situation calls for co-ordination of action and possible ultimate evacuation."

Operations

In this and related sections in the later plan sent July 20th, GM makes it clear that it would be willing to continue operations even with black workers under military or

police duress, and would cooperate with the government to meet "imposed requirements."

"(a) Unless civil unrest or industrial interruptions precluded the plant from operating by reason of reduced supplies, withholding of labour, failure of transportation systems or a combination of these factors, normal plant operation is assumed.

"(b) In the event that an emergency situation is declared, it is likely that there will be imposed requirements, e.g., trucks and commercial vehicles to meet national needs. Under such conditions it is almost certain that manpower requirements would have to be supplemented and would most probably be controlled by a central authority such as the Manpower Board. Vehicles may be taken over for Civil Defence purposes.

"Constraints on free movement of employees within industry would be likely and screening of employees is a distinct possibility."

Describing the potential situation in its later plan the company says:

"At the point when government takes action in terms of the Civil Defence Act No. 39 of 1966, such as in the form of placing a military presence on the property, it is understood at this time that all aspects of security will fall under their control. Plant management and personnel will have specific requirements to meet and there will undoubtedly be additional security facilities required.

"The full implications of such eventuality cannot be assessed at this time."

Even at this point GM would apparently feel no compulsion to cease operations.

National Emergency

Indeed the main contingency plan goes on to talk about even more extreme conditions without saying unequivocally what it would do about them.

"(c) Should the emergency situation escalate nationally, it is fair to assume that the Government would declare the country to be virtually in a state of war. This in effect would place the industry at the disposal of national authorities and it is almost certain that National Key Point industries would be taken over by an arm of the Ministry of Defence which would regulate output and co-ordinate the entire industrial effort.

"At such time, operating control of plants like General Motors and Ford as well as others would most certainly be vested in South African nationals and all materials, manpower and production requirements would be tied into the overall national requirements."

How long then would GM be willing to continue operating, working in close collaboration with the South African government during periods of intense political confrontation between the minority regime and the majority black population? The answer appears to be much too long.

In its own "Comments" GM says,

"Under normal conditions, the motor manufacturing and assembly industry is one of the largest in the country with considerable economic weight. The recent downswing has clearly indicated the extent to which it

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GENERAL MOTORS SOUTH AFRICAN (PTY.) LIMITED

INTER-OFFICE MEMO

To: Mr D. Martin, Jr.

From: L. H. Wilking

Tel Fax:

Date: 20 July, 1977

Subject: Contingency Planning - GM South African

Enclosed please find a draft outline on the above subject as requested in Dirk Kager's telex of 15 July.

We have summarised the potential situation which might arise and the proposed action by the plant, without of course the benefit of any experience of such conditions.

No doubt the type of civil unrest experienced in the U.S. comes to mind in this context, but as you are aware, the free mobility of dissidents and the ability to organise large numbers of non-whites and generate action is not the same in South Africa as it is in the U.S. As indicated in Attachment "B" which provides some wider background to the subject, law enforcement action is pretty fast and aims at confining disturbances to residential areas.

To minimise detrimental effect on employee morale and to avoid giving the impression that we expect these things to happen, all preparatory work has been carried out quietly and discretely.


L. H. Wilking

is affected by declining market demand. While there is little indication as yet that the Government may prescribe some course of action to the industry, it is almost certain that should economic conditions decline sufficiently far, there could be a directive issued on model build by various companies—firstly, to preserve the capability of building vehicles and secondly, to ensure sources of supply in the case of greater emergency requirements."

In such circumstances, where the government was controlling production very deliberately in its own interests, GM would continue operations unless the restrictions interfered with profitability.

It would also continue in conditions of considerably greater interference.

It appears that only at the point where the Ministry of Defence actually sought to take over the plant would GM feel compelled to at least examine the question as to whether this situation was acceptable.

"Action by the local Government in terms of any or all of a series of possibilities arising from conditions of social unrest or further economic decline can be seen broadly as follows:

(a) on the basis of National key point status, assume responsibility for guarding premises, training plant personnel for military type duties and upgrading of security facilities to a specified level.

(b) exercise a measure of control over facilities to be used to meet imposed requirements, e.g., trucks and commercial vehicles, passenger cars and possibly other wheeled, non-fighting vehicles such as trailers and sup-

GENERAL MOTORS SOUTH AFRICAN PTY. LIMITED
INTER-OFFICE MEMORANDUM

As requested and discussed with you over the telephone, the enclosed summary outlines the background and the basic plant protection measures relevant to GM South African, in the event of civil unrest.

The action plan has not yet been tried out in full since there has been no need to adopt it. To avoid focussing attention on it, we are approaching this entire matter on a low key but maintain close liaison with the Civil Defence authorities. Many management personnel have been briefed on the overall pattern of control and there is close co-operation between companies in the industrial areas.

This package is being sent by hand with one of our employees due in Detroit this weekend. Should any further information be required, please indicate what may be needed.

W.C. Metz

(c) assume responsibility for assigning scarce categories of manpower and possibly crash training of lesser skilled trades.

(d) impose requirements with regard to security rating of employees, with particular reference to foreign nationals employed in the industry.

(e) screening of employees to eliminate possibility of sabotage."

These conditions would amount to virtually having the South African Government as a partner in the business and poses the question as to whether or not this situation would be acceptable to the Corporation and/or international community.

"... it would be fair to assume that under conditions of National emergency the major elements of this industry would be taken over by an arm of the Ministry of Defence (Armscor?) which would completely regulate output and co-ordinate it within the entire industrial effort. (Note: Parentheses in the original. Armscor is the government owned Armaments Development and Manufacturing Corporation of South Africa, which was established in 1962 to operate and control South Africa's armaments production.)

"At such time, if not before, the question of continuing American participation in South African business might well be finalised and operating control of Plants such as General Motors and Ford would most certainly be vested in South African nationals.

"The terms of such a takeover could only be assumed at this time to be either nationalisation of the assets or a negotiated sale under prevailing conditions."

There is one obvious gap in the GM document—the military implications of continuing a South African operation.

GM only refers obliquely to this question when it reports that

“GM South African has, for example, been requested to supply vehicles such as the K25, K31, 4x4 LUV for defence force purposes and refusal to offer such might be interpreted as reflecting doubt on the motives of the Company.

"Such interpretation or a variation thereof could lead to direct loss of other government business and seriously affect GM South African's share of the vehicle market and very likely threaten its viability."

Obviously, the South African government has recognized the strategic importance of plant products by its designation of Key Point Industry.

By continuing to operate inside South Africa the corporation must inevitably feed into South African defense needs, even if it avoids overtly making military weapons. Troops carriers, four wheel vehicles, light trucks—all these are essential for a mobile army.

Significance of the Documents

The documents make a mockery of GM's claim to act as a force for change in South Africa. GM's white South African managers see the interests of the company as identical to those of the South African government. Not the least sympathy is expressed for black demands which might lead to a so-called "period of civil unrest." GM bases its plans on the assumption that it would cooperate fully in suppressing such protest, to the point where it would be willing to operate with South African troops directing workers in the plants in any period of black political action.

The plans underscore once more the irrelevance of attempts to mollify critics of U.S. corporate collaboration with apartheid through talk of "equal opportunity" for black workers. In the final analysis, the struggle in South Africa is a struggle for political power and the South African government views the presence of companies such as GM and Ford as strategic. It has well-laid plans to use these companies to protect its system of white supremacy, and these documents make it clear that GM intends to fully comply.

It is for this reason that blacks in South Africa are increasingly demanding that the United States withdraw its corporate interests from South Africa, lest it be inevitably drawn into these plans to crush the movement for full rights in South Africa.