

REPORT FROM THE SECURITY COUNCIL



Editor's Note: With the start of Canada's two-year term on the United Nations Security Council, Peace&Security begins a new regular column dealing with UN Security Council affairs. The author of Report From the Security Council, Trevor Rowe, is based in New York and has been a regular contributor to CBC Radio on UN matters for the last seven years. Mr. Rowe has also written for The Toronto Star, La Presse, The Independent (London), the Boston Globe, and Southam News, and is a frequent contributor to the Christian Science Monitor radio service.

Downing of Libyan Fighters

■ After waging an all-out campaign to secure a seat on the United Nations Security Council, Canada got off to an urgent start when the world organization's supreme body met in early January to deal with the tensions sparked by the US downing of two Libyan jets. "It's started with a bang, literally," noted Yves Fortier, Canada's newly appointed ambassador, as he left the Council chamber after a round of consultations with the fourteen other members.

The Council had to weigh two versions of events and to decide whether or not the US action was justified. Libya contended that its planes were unarmed and, while on a reconnaissance mission, the victims of an unprovoked attack. The US insisted the Libyan jets had acted with hostile intent, repeatedly tailing the US fighter planes even as they took evasive

action. The Libyans maintained throughout that the US evidence about the incident had been faked.

Canada's initial reaction was one of caution. From 4 January when the council began informal consultations, to the next evening, Mr. Fortier told reporters Canada intended to weigh all the evidence before reaching a decision. He added that Canada wanted to hear all the speakers in the debate. When pressed on the issue of whether the US attack was justified, Fortier told reporters, "let us hear all the speakers ... we're in mid-stream. It's not over till it's over and the fat lady hasn't sung as far as I'm concerned." But the next day, before all the speakers had addressed the council, Secretary of State for External Affairs Joe Clark declared in Paris that Canada accepted the US version of events.

The incident, although minor, raised the possibility that perhaps the Ambassador was not being kept as well informed as he could have been. Former Ambassador Stephen Lewis complained on his departure of friction with the upper echelons of External Affairs because he was an outsider. Mr. Fortier, a successful Montreal lawyer, is also a political appointee. But afterwards, he insisted repeatedly there were no problems with his department. "Communication with Ottawa as far as this ambassador is concerned is perfect," he said in an interview.

A resolution deploring the downing of the two Libyan planes was ultimately defeated by the triple veto of the US, Britain and France. Canada was the only other country to oppose the resolution while Brazil and Finland abstained.

PLO Recognition

■ Before the Libyan issue could be voted on, a strictly procedural initiative by the Palestine Liberation Organization intruded on the

deliberations. Under the rules, the PLO, which has observer status, was unable to address the Security Council unless sponsored by a member state. But during the debate on Libya, the PLO demanded the state-like privilege of being able to speak in the Council without having to seek a sponsor.

It also wanted to be recognized as the Permanent Representative of the Bureau of Palestine rather than the Observer of the Palestine Liberation Organization. The changes had already been accorded in the General Assembly, but the US was opposed to a similar move by the Security Council. However, because the issue was deemed a procedural one, the US was unable to use its veto and could only vote against. Canada, the United Kingdom and France abstained. The rest of the Council voted in favour.

In an explanation of vote, Ambassador Fortier said Canada was not opposed to the Bureau of Palestine addressing the UN but was of the view that past procedure should be followed. He reiterated that Canada did not recognize the Palestinian State declared in Algiers. However, the ambiguity of the abstention seemed to indicate that while Canada did not favour a procedural change that enhanced the PLO status, it would not stand in the way.

Namibian Independence

■ A lot of time was devoted to the implementation of Resolution 435, which paves the way for Namibian independence, a question on which Canada was active during its previous stint on the Council ten years ago and as a member of the Contact Group of Western nations. Under the original plan, the UN would deploy a force of as many as 7,500 military

personnel. Known as the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG), its purpose is to ensure the peace and create the conditions for free elections. However, the five permanent members of the council – the US, USSR, UK, France and China – all favour a reduced force. The Secretary General has suggested 4,650 military personnel, of which Canada would provide several hundred.

The reduction was vigorously opposed by the African front-line states and the South West Africa Peoples Organization (SWAPO). Canada's position was that the force be as effective as possible and while it would like to see a reduced force, with the resulting reduced costs, it would support whatever levels were deemed necessary to ensure a smooth transition to independence.

Other Issues

■ Among other issues before the Council was the renewal of the mandate for the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL), and in Iran and Iraq (UNIMOG). The Council also held consultations on a draft statement critical of Israeli behaviour in the Occupied Territories as well as to decide on a date for elections to fill a vacancy on the International Court of Justice.

Rarely has the council been as active on the question of peace-keeping. Diplomatic initiatives in the Western Sahara and Kampuchea could also see the use of UN troops and these issues could well come before the Council as early as this year. □

– TREVOR ROWE