

Comecon-Africa Trade Bloc In The Offing

The current tours of Soviet Union President Nikolai Podgorny and Cuban President Fidel Castro through Africa, combined with recent visits of other socialist country leaders have given impetus to several projects of regional economic integration on the African continent and may, according to informed political observers in Europe, lead to the creation of a Comecon-Africa trading bloc.

President Podgorny was particularly successful in improving Soviet relations with Zambia, whose collaboration is essential to establishing a planned economic bloc among the front-line states, and whose president, Kenneth Kaunda, recently elaborated a policy for debt relief and the new world economic order. The improvement in Zambia-Soviet relations has been brought about largely by what President Kaunda called the "ambiguous policy of the West..." toward southern Africa, which impelled him to "turn to the traditional ally of fighters for freedom, the Soviet Union and other socialist countries." Kaunda also attacked the western oil companies for their support of the outlaw Rhodesian regime of Ian Smith.

After his Zambia visit, Podgorny flew to Mozambique where he and President Samora Machel signed a Soviet-Mozambique Friendship Treaty similar to the treaty signed with Angola last year. Upon leaving Mozambique,

Podgorny was expected to return to Tanzania for additional talks with President Julius Nyerere.

To counter the Soviet diplomatic drive, the U.S.-linked counterinsurgent Reverend Sithole of Rhodesia held a news conference in Lusaka, Zambia — timed to conflict with a meeting between Podgorny and three liberation movement leaders — in which he denounced the exclusive support given by the front-line states to the Zimbabwe Patriotic Front coalition. Sithole claimed to have support from numerous African states for his "legitimacy" as a liberation movement leader and threatened to split the meeting of the Organization of African Unity this summer over the issue. His counterinsurgent colleague Bishop Muzorewa, for his part, has issued a call for a referendum in Rhodesia to elect a black majority government — knowing full well that the Patriotic Front, banned by the Smith government, would be unable to participate.

This ploy has not succeeded. Zambian Foreign Minister Siteke Mwale angrily replied to Rev. Sithole March 30 with a reassertion of Zambia's, and the other front-line states' exclusive support for the Patriotic Front coalition. British Foreign Secretary David Owen, due to start a southern Africa tour April 11, also soundly rejected Muzorewa's referendum proposal.