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Trouble With Nigeria

There is no excuse for Nigeria's action in making public President Ford's personal letter to the Chief of State, Brigadier Mohammed, concerning Soviet and Cuban intervention in the Angolan civil war. But given the intensity of feeling throughout black Africa about the involvement in Angola of white South Africans, Mr. Ford would have been better advised to forgo a formal letter, certain to be taken at this time as a crude attempt to apply pressure to a leading member of the Organization of African Unity.

President Ford's views on Angola are well known and his letter—evidently sent to other African leaders in addition to Brigadier Mohammed—contains nothing of substance that any government ought to find intolerable. It is, rather, its tone and timing—almost on the eve of the O.A.U. conference on Angola—that probably infuriated the Nigerians.

Nigeria's present military regime has been in power less than six months since its overthrow of the popular General Gowon. It is inexperienced and immature and obviously determined to jettison the quiet, yet often effective, diplomacy of the Gowon period for a more assertive leadership role, particularly on the explosive southern African questions.

Especially after Nigeria had recognized the Soviet-backed Popular Movement as the Government of Angola, it would have been wiser to communicate Mr. Ford's views orally and quietly through normal diplomatic channels. However, Nigeria's rude action might yet have a positive effect if it helped convince the Administration finally of the depth of black African feeling against South Africa and the extreme long-run hazards for Washington in any collaboration with the white Government in Pretoria.