

# Israeli friends

**T**he story of Johann Blaauw, a brigadier in the South African army and a go-between in Israeli-South African nuclear swaps, came to light recently. Blaauw's role was outlined in the records of his secret extortion trial in the mid-1980s. Part of this information was first publicly reported in March and April 1993 by Des Blow of the *Johannesburg City Press*.

According to the trial judgment, after the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Leon Zimmerman, a South African who had immigrated to Israel, asked Blaauw to find out if the South African government would sell Israel spare parts for Mirage jets. In return for the parts, Israel sent a team of experts to advise the South African Air Force on constructing air fields.

Blaauw established a close relationship with members of Israel's Council for Scientific Liaison, which has been tied to clandestine military and nuclear purchases. The first of four clandestine nuclear deals occurred in the mid-1970s, when a member of the Israeli council named Benjamine asked Blaauw to procure South African yellowcake (uranium ore concentrate), which Israel undoubtedly wanted for its weapon-grade plutonium production reactor at Dimona.

Blaauw talked to Gen. Hendryk van den Bergh, head of the Bureau of State Security (BOSS), about the importance of closer ties with Israel. Van den Bergh went to Prime Minister John Vorster, who eventually agreed to sell Israel 50 metric tons of yellowcake.

When Minister of Mines Piet Koornhog objected to the sale, he was replaced by Fanie Botha, who took charge of the transfer. This secret operation was known to only a

few people, including Ampie Roux, then chairman of the Uranium Enrichment Corporation.

Blaauw testified that "a high degree of confidence [was] developing between the South African and Israeli governments which involved the exchange of military technology, joint aeronautic ventures, and the supply

has refused to name them, even to the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The AEC's predecessor agency, the AEB, was reportedly interested in boosted bombs or thermonuclear concepts. A supply of tritium would have been useful for its research.

Armstrong, which was manufacturing South Africa's relatively simple nuclear weapons, was not interested in the AEC's theoretical studies of boosted gun-type devices. (With no weapon use in sight—and with about half the tritium already lost to radioactive decay—the AEC decided in the mid-1980s to use the remaining tritium in radioluminescent safety signs.)

Blaauw's next two deals involved more yellowcake. First, South Africa sent Israel another 50 metric tons.

The next and final deal involved 500 tons of yellowcake that was already stored in Israel. With Blaauw's assistance, the Israelis convinced South Africa to release it to them. Why this material was in Israel in the first place was not explained.

Blaauw was also involved in trying to obtain enriched uranium and other materials for the Koeberg nuclear power reactors.

The judgment in Blaauw's trial also revealed a peculiar level of corruption among some of the people who negotiated these deals. Blaauw apparently had a million-dollar fund, supplied by the Israelis, to funnel to Fanie Botha as needed. Botha was an habitual bankrupt.

As for Blaauw himself, he was tried in 1988 for trying to extort mining concessions from Fanie Botha, who was still a South African government official, by threatening to reveal some of Botha's past dealings. He was found not guilty of all charges. □

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of 'know-how' by Israel to South Africa in regard to the manufacture of weaponry."

The next secret nuclear transfer involved tritium. General van den Bergh asked Blaauw if he could acquire tritium for South Africa, and Blaauw arranged to get 30 grams from Israel. According to the trial record, "That quantity of tritium was sufficient for the manufacture of 12 atomic bombs." The judgment provides no explanation of how the number was derived, although it does describe tritium as used to enhance the explosive value of (or for "boosting") a nuclear bomb.

The Israelis delivered the tritium, code-named "Tea Leaves" or *Tee-blare*, in a series of small shipments that started in 1977 and ended about a year later. Each shipment contained several tiny capsules with 2.5 grams of tritium each.

Although the Atomic Energy Corporation (AEC) has admitted receiving tritium from overseas suppliers, it