

HISTORY OF SWISS DIPLOMACY

Aubert's African adventure, a turning point for Swiss foreign policy

By Andrea Tognina

JAN 31, 2019 - 14:42



Pierre Aubert and his wife in Cameroon, January 19, 1979

(StAAG/RBA/Reto Hügin)

Forty years ago the Swiss foreign affairs minister spent two weeks travelling around West Africa. The visit opened a new chapter in Swiss foreign policy and triggered considerable controversy and heated debates back home about neutral Switzerland's role in the world.

On Sunday January 14, 1979, a plane took off from Zurich airport heading for Lagos in Nigeria. On board was a Swiss delegation headed by Foreign Affairs Minister [Pierre Aubert](#).

+ Pierre Aubert's obituary.

Over the following fortnight, the delegation, which included other members of the foreign ministry and the economics ministry, visited Nigeria, Cameroon, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), Ivory Coast and Senegal.



PIERRE AUBERT IN AFRICA **Exploring a continent**

Aubert's trip to Africa was also a media event. He was followed by a pool of journalists, including Reto Hügin, a photographer for the Swiss ...

The foreign ministry had realised there was a lack of personal contacts between those in charge of Swiss foreign policy and representatives of African countries, Aubert [told the Federal Council](#) on January 5, 1979.

"In our opinion it's important for political and economic reasons to resume dialogue with the countries of this continent," he said.

Dodis

This article is part of a series dedicated to the History of Swiss Diplomacy in collaboration with [Dodis](#), the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland.

Dodis is a Bern-based research project aiming to edit key documents on Swiss foreign relations.

Beyond representing a goodwill gesture towards African countries, the aim of the trip was to explain the focus of Switzerland's foreign policy and to highlight the Swiss point of view concerning problems facing the continent. The itinerary also included meetings on issues linked to development cooperation and business relations.

‘Turning point’

“Cabinet ministers had started travelling abroad a few years previously, but with Aubert there was a turning point,” said Sacha Zala, director of [R. Dodis](#). “As part of Swiss foreign policy people started talking about human rights – a term which had previously been more or less a taboo for Swiss ministers. The policy of neutrality prevented talking about human rights, which would have been seen as interfering in the affairs of other countries.”

A large pool of reporters ensured that the new elements of Aubert's African adventure didn't escape his colleagues back in Bern.

The voyage had [generated headlines](#) even before it had begun. In addition to criticism of the “dynamism” that Aubert wanted to inject into Swiss foreign policy, some voices expressed the fear that he could express too openly the opinion of African leaders regarding apartheid South Africa.

This is an iframe content

00:00 / 06:32

SWI

Pierre Aubert in Africa

From the programme "Panorama der Woche" by Swiss public television (today SRF) at the end of January 1979.