

MR. LEONARD GEBLIEL

Verbatim statement by Mr. Leonard Gebliel, 27-year-old contract laborer from South West Africa, who was a stowaway in a ship to America as a fugitive from South African oppression.

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A long time ago I was at school. I went to school with Toivo* at St. Mary's. I came to know Sam Nujoma in Windhoek. About my coming over here. I informed Toivo about my coming. He thought it was an excellent idea to have a member of the Ovamboland Peoples Organization out of the country. First I worked in Ochiwarongo as a contract laborer. Then I went back to Ovamboland. Then I went to Omaruru from there and proceeded to Swakopmund and from there to Walvis Bay. I worked there about eight years in the hotels.

I came by myself to the harbor. I concealed myself in the cargo hold in the boat (of the Lykes Brothers Steamship Company). I remained inside there for six days and came out on the sixth day through the ventilation hole. When they saw me, they asked me where I came from. I told them. They kept me in a small cabin and tied my arms to a pole. During the daytime they allowed me to join the crew in painting the boat. At night and on Sunday I had to remain tied to the pole.

When we arrived in New Orleans they handed me over to other police (apparently the Danners Marine Guard Service). Those transferred me to a boat bound for Cape Town. I don't remember how many days I was there because they used to keep me tied on my bed. One day when the police left my cabin I took my belt and tied it to the ceiling of my cabin. I tied it around my neck. One of the police came and rescued me. During that time I was on a hunger strike and they decided to send me (on October 20th) to a hospital in the city (Galveston, Texas).

In that first hospital I was well treated. I was placed in the mental patients' ward and remained there for four days. After that I was transferred to the ordinary patients' ward. I never tried to run away from that hospital. I was then taken to the Marine Hospital. In that second hospital I was not well treated. I was there for about two days. It was then that the boat people told me that they were taking me back to Walvis Bay. I went on a second hunger strike. Then they decided to handcuff me on my legs and arms. I used to sleep handcuffed on my legs and arms. After that the immigration men informed me that they were taking me to New York. Then I came to New York (by air on November 6th) on my way back to South Africa.

I couldn't flee because I didn't have the opportunity. I was always tied or in the handcuffs, but I did try to commit suicide rather than go back to South West Africa. I decided to commit suicide because I know that once I return to South West Africa I would be placed in prison indefinitely. If I were ever released, I would be taken back to Ovamboland never to come out again. Going back to Ovamboland is just like declaring yourself dead alive because there is no employment. You cannot get money to buy food or clothes. You are not allowed to meet with those who return from their contract labors, nor are you allowed to meet with anyone in a group of three. If you are seen in a group of 3 or 4 young men, you can be arrested by the Native Commissioner.

*A leader of the Ovamboland people who has been approved as a petitioner by the United Nations but who has never been permitted by the Union of South Africa to come to New York City to testify.

When I left, Toivo was in the Chief's custody in Ovamboland. They don't treat him well in that place. It is worse than the way they treat a criminal, but perhaps there is a likelihood of his being released some day.

First I must thank this government (the United States) for making it possible for me not to go back to South West Africa. Second, I am beginning to feel as a free person compared to how I was feeling in South West Africa. Third, I must thank all of those who have helped me, especially Miss Angie Brooks (Assistant Secretary of State for Liberia) and the Liberian Government.

I am sure I will be able to contribute to what has been done by my friends at UNO by informing them and the world about my experiences in South West Africa. As one who has worked as a contract laborer, I can say this. On contract you feel like a beast of burden. And if you are not on contract, you feel like a bird without a dwelling place. In your own country you have no dwelling place. But now I feel like one who has returned from death for the first time. The few white people I have come in contact with here have left me bewildered. For the first time I am seeing face to face with white people who are human beings like myself. The fascinating thing about my experience is that, when I begin to look at both white and black people in this place, we're both human beings, not just white and black.

At the present time what I can say about South West Africa is this. It must be freed from the South Africans to make it a country worth living in for both white and black. My own brothers are as if they are in chains in South West Africa.

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(This statement was made by Mr. Gebliel in the U.S. Immigration detention headquarters, Washington Street, on November 11, 1959, to Mr. Mburumba Kerina, also from South West Africa, who translated the statement from the Herero language into English.)

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