

# Dateline: Namibia

Editorial

## The Final Weeks

In just a few weeks, Black Namibians will go to the polls in elections that will bring an end to over a century of foreign domination. For a people denied even the most basic rights because of their race, the opportunity to vote takes on even greater significance.

But mingled with this intoxicating sense of hope is a terrible foreboding that the goal of free and fair elections may still be denied. For although the election will be held under international supervision, it is South Africa which will actually conduct the balloting.

A crucial election statistic is the fact that almost forty percent of the prospective voters are illiterate, and therefore at the mercy of personnel at the local polling station — personnel who are apt to be South African, and may well be misleading, harsh, intimidating, and worse. Under those conditions, the possibility of casting a fair, free, and secret vote without fear of reprisal becomes an all too fragile hope.

Although many Namibians may not yet read fluently, they understand the situation only too well. And they know their Bible! "You do not ask Pharaoh to lead you out of Egypt!" was the recent observation of a Namibian to a visiting delegation of Roman Catholic observers, reflecting the common knowledge that opportunities for manipulation, intimidation and deceit can scarcely be exaggerated. Only continued pressure on South Africa by Namibia's friends can help assure a fair election process.

At this critical time we urge you to continue all your efforts in solidarity with the Namibian people: write to your legislators; our president; UN officials; our friends in Namibia. And continue to remember Namibians in your prayers, that at last they may be free.



United Nations police in northern Namibia. Despite their presence it is still not possible to conduct free and fair elections in the territory.

Credit: John Liebenberg

## South African Violations Still Threaten Peace Plan

Five months after their arrival, United Nations forces overseeing the independence process in South African-ruled Namibia have been unable to ensure the political stability and civil liberties needed for genuinely free and fair elections.

After months of protests in Namibia, at the United Nations and in countries around the world, South Africa has been forced to make some grudging changes in its administration of the territory. But even as Pretoria has given way on some issues, they have found other ways to undermine the UN plan.

Many observers fear that unless effective action is taken to end political violence and intimidation, and to curb persistent South African violations of the United Nations independence plan, the upcoming November poll could usher in a new round of bloodshed and repression instead of a free and democratic Namibian government.

These serious problems come at a time when the formal timetable for the UN plan, Security Council Resolution 435, is nearly at an end. By early September, more than 650,000 persons (around 90% of the estimated total) had registered and almost 40,000 Namibian exiles had returned to their native land, rejoining families and friends some had not seen for twenty years.

The various Namibian political parties have begun registering to participate in the elections and have been conducting campaign rallies in many parts of the country.

There are even indications that some members of the brutal Koevoet counter-insurgency force that had been incorporated into the South West Africa Police in violation of the independence plan (see *Dateline: Namibia*, August 1989), may finally be removed from the police. On August 16, South Africa's

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Administrator General in Namibia Louis Pienaar announced that 1,200 of the feared Koevoet troops would be confined to base.

### **A Pattern of Violations**

But serious problems remain. On August 31 the UN reported that all 1200 of the Koevoet men had been confined to base under United Nations supervision, but only between the hours of 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. The agreement leaves Koevoet free to continue assaulting and intimidating supporters of the Namibian independence movement SWAPO after dark. Nor did South Africa disband the soldiers, as required by Resolution 435. They remain on the police payroll with their weapons and command structure intact — ready to return to the field on the first pretext.

Furthermore, as many as 500 Koevoet soldiers — once described as “trained killers” by one of their own officers — remain active in the police, and General Hans Dreyer, the founder and leader of Koevoet, is still commander of the police in the north.

And even as the South Africans were being forced to restrict Koevoet, they were quietly arming and instructing soldiers in their demobilized Namibian army to continue the violent intimidation of SWAPO supporters in the north.

Under the terms of the UN plan, thousands of Namibian soldiers in “ethnic” battalions of the South African-sponsored South West Africa Territorial Force were demobilized in late April. But South Africa insisted that it be permitted to keep these soldiers on the army payroll until November. These former SWATF troops have been recruited into the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance, an internal party closely allied with Pretoria and, together with Koevoet, responsible for much political violence.

In July, the DTA hired a white former SWATF lieutenant named de Wit to be their election campaign manager in Ovamboland, an area where support for SWAPO is very strong. He told his former soldiers that only DTA members would continue to receive their pay packets, and distributed South African-made traditional weapons — knives,

clubs, and bows and arrows — for use against SWAPO.

In the weeks that followed, many brutal assaults on SWAPO activists by armed DTA members were reported to UN authorities in the area. During one five-day period in late August, over two dozen people were assaulted by DTA assailants, including a ten-year-old girl who was struck in the face with an arrow.

The inability of the United Nations to compel South African compliance with Resolution 435 over the demobilization of Koevoet is a powerful example of the problems that continue to plague the Namibian independence plan. The presence of Koevoet paramilitary forces in the police had been protested inside Namibia and in the international community since almost the beginning of the election process, but it was only after months of pressure — and the personal visit to Namibia of UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar — that South Africa agreed to some modifications of Koevoet's presence in the police.

### **Weak UN Role**

There is also great concern that South Africa's draft law covering the elections provides ample opportunities for vote rigging by Pretoria. Yet another South African law governing the drafting of Namibia's independence constitution after the elections has also stirred outrage, because it gives the South African Administrator General virtual veto power over the process.

These draft laws were released in late July and were met with almost immediate protests. The Council of Churches in Namibia, SWAPO, the NamLaw Project, and the Washington-based Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law all released detailed criticism of the draft.

But the UN Secretary General's Special Representative in Namibia, Martti Ahtisaari, appeared unwilling to confront Pretoria over the electoral law, and indicated he would accept the drafts.

As pressure for a reversal of Mr. Ahtisaari's position mounted, the Africa Group of States and the Non-Aligned Countries at the United Nations demanded a special meeting of the

Security Council to review the transition process. During the debate, which extended over nearly two weeks, representatives from nation after nation stood up and demanded that South Africa adhere to the terms of Resolution 435, and redraft the election laws.

In late August, the United Nations Security Council issued a strongly worded resolution condemning violations of the independence plan and demanding “strict compliance by all parties concerned, especially South Africa.”

The resolution also called for the complete dismantling of Koevoet, for a review and possible strengthening of the UN contingent in Namibia, and for the Secretary General to review the draft election law and the law on the Constituent Assembly.

As the Security Council was drafting this language, the Secretary General sent a strongly worded nine-page telex to his special representative in Namibia demanding specific changes in the election laws, including that ballots be counted at the polling stations, that ballot secrecy be ensured, and that UN instead of South African officials assist illiterate voters. To underline his concern, the Secretary General also dispatched a legal expert from headquarters to help in the redrafting of the electoral law.

### **The Final Weeks**

There is no way to predict what will happen in the final weeks before the November 6 elections. But it is safe to assume that without constant monitoring and public protest both internally and internationally, South Africa will continue to undermine the independence plan at every turn.

Although Resolution 435 gives South Africa great power over the elections, experience shows that Pretoria will respond to pressure from the international community. One source of that pressure is local advocacy and action with our own government to support freedom for Namibia.

As Dateline: Namibia goes to press in early September, the Namibian people are making their final preparations for the elections. But whether the balloting will be truly free and fair still remains to be seen.

## SWAPO Detainees Charge Abuse: Churches Seek Reconciliation

(In recent weeks there have been revelations of torture in detention camps run by the Namibian independence movement SWAPO. This has raised many questions for American Christians, who recognize that SWAPO is supported by the overwhelming majority of Black Namibian Christians. The following article addresses these issues.)

After more than twenty years of war, Namibian political prisoners are finally coming home. Under the UN plan for independence, both parties to the conflict, South Africa and SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization), agreed to release all such prisoners so that they could participate freely in the election process. But their return has brought unexpected questions about the harsh treatment meted out to some people accused of spying while under SWAPO control.

South African terror and brutality is notorious, but Namibians clearly expect a different standard of behavior from their liberation leaders. Widespread concern has been expressed as up to 300 men and women held by SWAPO have returned, some displaying signs of physical abuse, and many telling stories of arbitrary arrest, torture, long periods of detention without trial, and even the disappearance and alleged death of some prisoners.

### Evidence of Mistreatment

Some of these stories have been proven untrue, but there is substantial evidence of mistreatment and brutality against other SWAPO detainees.

SWAPO Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Theo-Ben Gurirab, speaking within days of the first allegations, promised a full investigation, saying, "We don't condone torture under any circumstances." But other SWAPO statements appear to dismiss the accusations as coming only from people who were South African agents or spies.

Conservatives, South African and other, have seized eagerly on all reports of ill-treatment, however wild, as weapons in the propaganda battle to discredit SWAPO. In contrast, long-time allies of the Namibian people in their struggle

for justice and liberation, including thousands of American and European Christians who have long felt a particular connection with Namibian partner churches in their struggle for freedom, are urging SWAPO to deal directly with the issue.

### A Need for Reconciliation

The Council of Churches in Namibia, repeating its total opposition "to the abuse of human rights by whoever and for whatever reason," announced in late August that it had begun conversations with representatives of both the ex-SWAPO detainees and the leaders of the movement. "Moved by the spirit of God to 'speak the truth in the spirit of love'," the council recalled "the great pain suffered by Namibians in the cause of liberation.... Many of the victims of this vicious cycle of wars were innocent and the time has now come for us all to unite to bring about national healing, reconciliation and unity."

The West German Green Party, in an open letter to SWAPO, called on the movement to respond adequately to the serious allegations of the detainees:

Within the context of a "sordid war that was instigated by South Africa [which]...is responsible for the deaths

of thousands of people," the "violations of human rights which have been committed in SWAPO camps...pale by comparison," says the letter. "Still, these indisputable differences do not in any way justify what has happened. A liberation movement which is fighting for respect for human rights in its own country must never lose sight of this aim in dealing with its own 'dissidents.'"

Urging establishment of an independent commission of investigation, the Greens stress that "the persons responsible must be identified and called to account as quickly as possible."

While SWAPO has conceded that some officials responsible for interrogation had taken the law into their own hands, it had not, two months after the first major public accusations were made, taken any visible action against security officials. Assuring those expressing concern that SWAPO had released all political detainees, Mr. Gurirab told a press conference that former detainees, the International Red Cross, Amnesty International and the UNHCR would all be welcome to identify and visit any SWAPO camps where people were allegedly still being held. A first team left for Angola in early September.

There is no question that these human rights violations pale in comparison with the thousands killed by South Africa and its allies, and it is in recognition of this fact that support for SWAPO remains strong inside the country.

But as the churches in Namibia have often said, there can be no reconciliation without justice. In the interest of reconciliation, SWAPO should take decisive action to investigate rumors of killings and continuing detentions, and bring to justice all torturers and violators of human rights in its ranks. Until that is done, Namibians may reasonably fear that such abuses could one day be repeated in an independent Namibia.



SWAPO detainees in Angola. Namibian church leaders are seeking reconciliation between the former prisoners and the liberation movement.

At press time a leading member of SWAPO, Anton Lubowski, was assassinated by suspected right-wing extremists at his home in Windhoek. The murder has heightened tension in the capital on the eve of the arrival home of SWAPO President Sam Nujoma after 30 years in exile.

Credit: John Liebenberg



Namibians waiting to register for the November election. About 700,000 Namibians will participate in balloting leading to the end of over 70 years of South African occupation.

Credit: Mike Fishman

## One Last Push for Free and Fair Elections

This has been the summer of delegations to Namibia. Responding to a call for support and assistance in the months before the elections, Namibia's partner churches have been working to support their brothers and sisters through observer delegations, assistance in Namibia, and advocacy here at home.

The Episcopal Church is sending observers to Namibia throughout the process to express solidarity and support. Information from two delegations that have already returned is being incorporated into advocacy work directed at the United States government.

An international Roman Catholic delegation visited Namibia in late July, and left with penetrating, if profoundly discouraging observations about the state of the election process, and continuing human rights abuses by the counterinsurgency police unit Koevoet. The delegation, which included U.S. Catholic Bishops' Conference Africa Officer Robert Dumas, reported that Namibians feel a deep sense of unfairness about the South African-controlled elections process and are disappointed in the weak monitoring role of the U.N.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Ralston Deffenbaugh has been seconded to the Evangelical Lu-

theran Church in Namibia for the period of transition to independence. Deffenbaugh, a human rights lawyer with extensive experience in Namibia, interrupted his work to address the ELCA convention in late August, bringing American Lutherans up-to-date on the transition, resettlement, and election processes. Also at the Chicago convention, a letter-writing campaign addressing the unfair and deliberately cumbersome Namibian election process was spearheaded by Namibia advocates.

With barely a month left before the elections, U.S. Christians are working to keep Namibia before the public to ensure a free and fair election process.

### Advocacy

Take the time to write one last letter before the elections! Share your concern about Namibia with your elected officials, President Bush, and UN General Secretary Perez de Cuellar, and send messages of support to our Namibian brothers and sisters. Your letters have made a difference in the past. They can make a difference now.

What are the issues? Namibian church leaders, the United Nations and other international organizers have all called for important changes in the tran-

sition plan to ensure free elections. Use these last weeks before the elections to write to U.S. and United Nations leaders, urging them to make the basic changes outlined below. Even if you have already written before, this is the critical time and letters now could still help make a difference.

Stress the need for:

1. More United Nations personnel to monitor the South West Africa Police, who continue to harass and intimidate.
2. A stronger UN role in monitoring the South Africa-controlled elections.
3. Free and fair elections, and a guarantee that ballots will be secret, particularly in the case of illiterate voters. (Rather than assistance from South African personnel, suggest that help be provided by family members or UN personnel, to ensure that voters' wishes will be carried out.)

Write:

President George Bush  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20500

His Excellency Javier Perez de Cuellar  
Secretary General  
The United Nations  
New York, NY 10017

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

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