

The International Trade in Namibia's Uranium

(An overview of the Expropriation
of Namibia's uranium resources)

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The involvement of the United Kingdom

The involvement of the United Kingdom Government in the plunder of Namibia's uranium resources began in approximately 1966 when the Labour Government under Prime Minister Harold Wilson considered the supply of uranium required for the United Kingdom nuclear power programme in the mid to late 1970's. The main parties involved in determining the amount and delivery period over which this uranium would be supplied were the Ministry of Technology, the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA), and Rio Tinto-Zinc (RTZ), the largest mining and finance corporation in Britain.

As a result of the discussions which took place between these parties representatives of the Labour Government believed that the supplies of uranium for the mid to late 1970's would be obtained from the Rio Algom mines at Elliott Lake in Canada. Rio Algom, a subsidiary of RTZ, is the Canadian based mining company with whom the United Kingdom Government already held a substantial long term uranium contract for delivery between 1966 and 1982. What the Labour Government overlooked was that in March 1968 a group of officials from the Ministry of Technology had agreed with representatives from the UKAEA and RTZ that the uranium supplies would be obtained, not from Canada, but from the recently discovered RTZ deposit at Rossing in Namibia. After further deliberations, which representatives of the Labour Government claim they were not informed of, the overall supplies for the Government's contract were expanded from an original requirement of 6,000 tons to 7,500 tons of uranium.

The name given to this arrangement, through which successive United Kingdom Government's have become engaged in the plunder of Namibia's most strategic mineral resource, is the Rossing contracts.

Once secured these initial long term contracts for Namibia's uranium, which were placed with the UKAEA and later transferred to British Nuclear Fuels Ltd (BNF), enabled Rio Tinto-Zinc, firstly, to be guaranteed the necessary finance to develop the Rossing mine, a large proportion of which was made available by the South African Industrial Development Corporation, and, secondly, to secure other long term supply contracts. The major known contracts which exist are for supplies to Comurhex of France, Veba of the Federal Republic of Germany and Kansai Electric Power Corporation of Japan (see papers on France and Japan).

The response of the United Kingdom Government towards the Rossing contracts since their signing in approximately January 1970 and their

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effects upon United Kingdom Government policy towards Namibia are as follows:

1. Labour Government: 1966-70:

After the contracts had been agreed a leading member of the Wilson Government, supported by a number of other Cabinet members, sought an urgent inquiry into the process through which South African occupied Namibia had become the source of supply for the United Kingdom's uranium during the mid to late 1970's. The inquiry and its conclusions were never made public as a result of the defeat of the Labour Government at the 1970 General Election.

2. Conservative Government: 1970-74:

The incoming Conservative Government's attitude to the Rossing contracts was best stated by its Foreign Secretary, Sir Alec Douglas Home. After a visit to Namibia in 1968, two years after South Africa's mandate of administration for the territory had been terminated, Sir Alec declared that South Africa was still "the natural administrator of South West Africa... It is difficult to see how it could be otherwise." The statement made no reference to the United Nations Council for Namibia, which had been established as "the only legal authority to administer the territory...until independence" by the General Assembly in 1967.

The policy of the Foreign Office towards the Rossing contracts was a natural extension of the Foreign Secretary's attitude towards Namibia. It was therefore not surprising to find that the contracts were never discussed or alternative supplies considered during the Conservative Government's entire term of office.

3. Labour Government: 1974-79:

During its period in opposition the Labour Party had considered the issue of the Rossing contracts at length. In 1973, therefore, the Labour Programme for the next Labour Government pledged that the Party would terminate "the Atomic Energy contract with Rio Tinto-Zinc for uranium in Namibia." The pledge was fully endorsed by the Party Conference, but was not included in the Party's 1974 general election manifesto.

Immediately following Labour's return to Government in February 1974, which was achieved by a slender margin, a review of its policy towards Southern Africa was commenced. When the Government returned with a larger majority from the second general election of that year the conclusions of its policy review were set out by Foreign Secretary James Callaghan. After studying the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice of 1971 (which had declared South Africa's administration and occupation of Namibia as "illegal") the Foreign Secretary stated that although the Mandate held by South Africa could no longer be in force and its administration was unlawful (but not illegal), the Government could not agree that resolutions of the Security Council on Namibia were mandatory. Nor did it consider the United Nations Decree No.1 for the Protection of the Natural Resources of Namibia (enacted on 27 September 1974 two months before the Foreign Secretary's statement) to have any legal effect over the Rossing contracts or other trade between the United Kingdom and Namibia.

4. Conservative Government: 1979-

The 1974 policy statement of the Labour Government on Namibia has served as the basis for the current Conservative Government's policy under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Shortly after its election in 1979 the question of the Rossing contracts was raised with the then Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington. On his behalf a Foreign Office civil servant replied that: "The general policy of the British Government on trade with South Africa and Namibia...is one of non-interference with normal commercial links." The statement continued to add that: "In the case of the (Rossing) contracts... the government does not consider that there is any international obligation for it to interfere."

The present Conservative Government, like that of the previous Labour administration, considers that the General Assembly acted beyond the powers conferred upon it under the United Nations Charter in establishing the Council for Namibia and designating it with powers of administration for the territory until its independence. The current United Kingdom Government therefore considers that:

(a) United Nations Decree No. 1 of the Council for Namibia has no legal effect;

(b) South Africa's occupation is unlawful, but it remains the de facto administering authority.

(c) the Government does not have any obligation to take active measures to limit or stop commercial or industrial operations of British based corporations in Namibia, established with the approval of South Africa's administration.

Rio Tinto-Zinc and the Rossing mine

The development of RTZ's uranium prospecting activities in Namibia commenced during the mid-1960's. In July 1966, three months before the General Assembly terminated South Africa's mandate, RTZ obtained the rights to the deposits at Rossing from the locally based company of G.P. Louw Ltd. It was only in 1969, however, that the economic potential of the mine became apparent. One year later the company of Rossing Uranium Ltd was formed and since that time has operated and managed the Rossing mine on behalf of its London based parent.

The technique used to extract the uranium at Rossing is the open-cast system of mining, at which RTZ are reputed to be world specialists. Construction of the plant began in 1973 at which time the schedule for Rossing's development was as follows:

Table 1.	Late 1960's	-	Negotiations for long term contracts;
	Early 1970's	-	Development of the open cast mine;
	1973-1975	-	Construction and pre-production work;
	Early 1976	-	First supplies of ore from extraction plant to processing plant;
	Late 1976	-	Full production of uranium U ₃ O ₈ . (estimated schedule of 120,000 tons of ore per day yielding 5,000 tons of uranium oxide per year).

As a result of technical problems and strikes by the African workforce at the mine Rossing did not achieve its scheduled full production of 5,000 tons of uranium oxide a year until April 1979. This figure, which represents approximately one sixth of the Western worlds current uranium supplies, is of extreme strategic importance. Precise information as to what actually takes place at Rossing has therefore been refused by RTZ on the basis that information concerning security, development and long term contracts is not available under South Africa's Official Secrets Act. Despite such secrecy a detailed memorandum prepared by Rossing Uranium Ltd on its security operations was obtained by Rossing's African workers and made public by SWAPO at the United Nations Council for Namibia's Hearings on Namibian Uranium in July 1980. The document particularly revealed the extent of South African police involvement at Rossing and the management's access to firearms and other military equipment.

Earlier research had also established that Rossing is financed by a combination of one third equity and two thirds loans. The major equity participants being as follows:

Table 2.	Rio Tinto-Zinc Corporation (U.K.)	46.5
	Industrial Development Corporation (S.A.)	13.2
	Rio Algom Mines Ltd (Canada)	10.0
	(51.3 per cent owned by RTZ)	
	Total (France)	10.0
	(100 per cent owned by Compagnie Francaise des Petroles)	
	General Mining Union Corporation (S.A.)	5.0
	(62.5 per cent owned by Federale Mynbou)	
	Others (combined)	13.5

By 1976, two years after Decree No. 1 had been enacted, the total cost of developing the mine had reached \$240 million dollars, making it one of the largest mining projects RTZ had ever undertaken. As a result of further delays the need for the secure and swift delivery of Namibia's uranium to fulfil Rossing's long term supply contracts had, by early 1978, become a matter of increasing urgency.

Contracts and Transportation

The supply contracts held by Rossing Uranium Ltd are all with Western based nuclear energy utilities. Three of the Western States which hold direct contracts with the mine are members of the Western contact group on Namibia, while the other two are engaged in processing and enriching the uranium on route from Namibia to its customers in those three States. All five members of the contact group are therefore currently involved in receiving or handling Namibia's plundered uranium resources, obtained under the illegal authority of South Africa's administration, while at the same time continuing to negotiate with South Africa for Namibia's independence.

The present known customers, the volume of contracted supplies and the periods of scheduled delivery for uranium from Rossing are as follows:

Table 3.

Customer Receiving	Country	Amount(tons)	Period of Supply
British Nuclear Fuels Ltd	U.K.	7,500	1977-1982 (extended to at least 1984)
Comurhex	France	"substantial amount"	late 1970's to late 1980's
Veba	F.R.G.	undisclosed amount	unknown
Urangesellschaft	F.R.G.	reported as between 5 and 10 per cent of annual production	unknown
Kansai Electric Power Corporation	Japan	8,200	1977-1986

In regard to the contract with British Nuclear Fuels a statement by RTZ in February 1981 indicated that additional amounts of uranium above those already under contract would be supplied. The specific duration over which such supplies would be made has not been disclosed.

Although the above companies hold the contracts Namibia's uranium is not in every case delivered directly to them. Only British Nuclear Fuels and Comurhex are customers which are able to process their supplies from the basic grade of "yellowcake" delivered from Rossing. This is not so for the supplies to Veba and Urangesellschaft in the Federal Republic of Germany. In their case uranium from Rossing is enriched by the Urenco plant at Almelo in the Netherlands, a tripartite company of West German, British and Dutch nuclear interests.

First deliveries of uranium from Rossing commenced in February 1978. The method of transportation used was by air cargo, which was undertaken firstly by Boeing 707 aircraft of South African Airways (SAA) and shortly after by DC8 aircraft of the French airline Union des Transports Aeriens (UTA). The destination for these flights was France, where most of the uranium transported by the two airlines was met at the airports concerned and taken by a combination of road, rail and boat to the nuclear processing plants of British Nuclear Fuels in Preston, United Kingdom and Comurhex in Malvesi, France.

In December 1979 uranium cargo flights from Windhoek, Namibia into France were suddenly suspended. A short time later the management of UTA in Paris claimed that the contracts held by both airlines, which were due to expire at the end of December, had been completed several weeks early. A more plausible explanation, however, was the intended action by trade unionists involved in handling the uranium at various points on its journey to the nuclear processing plants in France and the United Kingdom. The action was jeopardised by two articles published in the French and British press, which alerted the authorities responsible who immediately suspended all further cargo flights from Namibia.

Research over the following weeks indicated that a new transportation route by sea was being used to make deliveries of Namibian uranium to Europe. In January, February and March 1980 the vessels "Urundi" and "Ulanga", both registered in the Federal Republic of Germany, docked at the port of Zeebrugge, Belgium. On each occasion freight containers of uranium known to have come from Namibia were unloaded onto lorries of a private non-unionised road haulage company Edmundsons, which is based approximately 20 miles from the British Nuclear Fuels Springfields plant in Preston, United Kingdom. Springfields is the plant to where regular supplies of Namibia's uranium were delivered from 1978 to mid-1980, the Edmundsons company being the final link in a 5,000 mile transport chain, which upto that date was the route for Namibian uranium from Rossing to Comurhex in France and British Nuclear Fuels in the United Kingdom.

After April and May 1981 the regularity of the uranium deliveries into the United Kingdom decreased. It was at this time that research conducted in North America revealed that uranium from South Africa and Namibia was being imported into Canada. Further research, which requires evaluation, appears to indicate that the supplies of Namibian uranium under contract to the Kansai Electric Power Corporation in Japan are being processed and enriched in North America prior to final transportation to Japan. The contract held by Kansai Electric for 8,200 tons has been confirmed as being supplied in amounts of 500-600 tons between approximately late 1978 to late 1981 and approximately 1,000 tons per year from 1982 upto 1988. On the basis that regular deliveries to France and the United Kingdom commenced almost two years later than scheduled (1979 rather than 1977), the initial supplies of 500 to 600 tons of uranium to Japan will have been delayed by a similar period. As a result the deliveries of the smaller initial supplies will only have been completed by approximately late 1981 with the larger volumes of approximately 1,000 tons per year at an early stage of delivery during 1982. While further investigations are necessary it is possible that Rossing may have fulfilled a proportion of its first long term contracts with the United Kingdom and France and is now concentrating on overcoming similar delays in delivery by fulfilling a satisfactory proportion of its supplies to Japan.

Japan and contracts for uranium

In regard to Japan it is important to note that besides the 8,200 ton uranium contract held by Kansai Electric for Namibian uranium, that the same company also holds another contract for approximately 2,800 tons from the Nuclear Fuels Corporation of South Africa with scheduled delivery between 1974 and 1984. At the same time two other Japanese companies Tokyo Electric Power Company and Chubu Electric Power Company also hold contracts for the

supply of a total of approximately 20,000 tons of uranium from South Africa. It is reported that a large proportion of this will be supplied by Rio Tinto-Zinc of South Africa between 1975 and 1985. A further contract for approximately 28,000 tons of uranium exists with the North American producer Denison Company of Canada.

On the basis of these contracts, which together represent approximately, 80.0 per cent of Japan's uranium requirements for the period 1975 to 1990, it is difficult to specify which of the supplies will have originated from Namibia, particularly if, as it appears, both South African and Namibian uranium is transported first to Canada, itself a Japanese supplier, before processing and enrichment. While difficult, however, similar research problems were faced during the research in Western Europe during the late 1970's, which located and substantiated the movement of Namibian uranium for supply to the United Kingdom, France and the Federal Republic of Germany.

Conclusions

The most important fact from the above information is the collaboration between Western based transnational corporations and their governments with the South African administration of Namibia. Without the guarantee of South Africa's approval for the operations of the Rossing Uranium mine, and more recently growing uranium prospecting operations by other Western based companies in Namibia, supplies of Namibia's uranium to the Western contact group members of the United Kingdom, France and the Federal Republic of Germany would be unable to take place. At the same time the involvement of the United States and Canada in the processing and enrichment of Namibian uranium and the involvement of their transnationals in Namibia's mining industry exposes the extent of the contact group in the plunder of Namibia's natural resources.

Recommendations for action on these issues, which might be undertaken are as follows:

(a) Research to expose the policies of Western States in permitting the operations of their transnational corporations in Namibia despite the terms of Security Council resolutions 276 of 1970, 283 of 1970 and 301 of 1971 and Decree No. 1 of 1974 enacted by the United Nations Council for Namibia.

(b) Research to fully document the extent of the involvement of Western based transnational corporations operating in Namibia, particularly those that have undertaken operations since the termination of South Africa's mandate.

(c) Research into those corporations and States that are receiving Namibia's natural resources and information on the various contracts which they hold.

(d) Co-ordination between researchers and non-governmental organisations to ensure effective use of research information.

(e) Continuous research on the policies of Western State members of the contact group, particularly with regard to their position on protecting their nationals against claims of compensation, nationalisation and acquisition of assets from a future lawful government of Namibia.

(f) Finally, while not related to the above, research on the policy's of Western State members of the contact group regarding the linkage of the

(f) Finally, while not directly related to the above, on-going research to establish the policy's of Western State members of the contact group in regard to the question of linkage of the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola prior to elections for the independence of Namibia.

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