

SWAPO of Namibia: a movement in exile

'The world has forgotten us. We sit here and write our atrocity stories and no one cares.'
Editor of *The Namibian*, the Windhoek weekly newspaper.

Namibia has indeed been forgotten, despite the world's momentary interest in the prospects of change amidst turmoil in South Africa, Namibia's occupying power. The twenty-sixth of August 1986 marked the twentieth anniversary of the start of the guerrilla war waged by the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) against the South African occupation forces, estimated at between 50,000 and 100,000.

The twenty-sixth of August, which SWAPO commemorates annually as Namibia Day, is also a date of significance to the Herero community of central Namibia, who shared with the southerly Nama the brunt of German exploitation and even genocide when, from 1884 to 1915, their country was colonised as German South West Africa. On that date in 1923 their chief, who had died in exile, was buried at their sacred burial place at Okahandja, where a great gathering has been held annually ever since, to keep alive the spirit of Namibian independence.

At a pre-Namibia Day rally in Windhoek on Sunday, 24 August 1986, the main speaker, Mokganedi Tlhabanelo of SWAPO, also Assistant General Secretary of the Council of Churches in Namibia, told the 8,000-strong gathering that the Namibians had taken up arms in 1966 against a background of colonial violence:

Was it SWAPO who in 1904 exterminated almost half the Herero speaking people, or was it General von Trotha? Was it SWAPO who in 1917 killed Chief Mandume and his men, or was it Louis Botha? Was it SWAPO who in 1922 killed the Bondelswarts nation in the South? On 10 December 1959, in the Old Location, many people were murdered. Was it by SWAPO?

Tlhabanelo called upon South Africa to accede to the cease-fire offered by SWAPO, since 'South Africa with all her sophisticated machinery cannot win this war,' after twenty years of 'attempting to wipe SWAPO off the face of the earth.' The veteran Acting President of SWAPO, Nathaniel Maxuilili, read a message from the exiled President, Sam Nujoma, threatening a general strike 'which will cripple Botha's regime in

Namibia'. Maxuilili, whose courageous bearing during over twenty years of house arrest and banning was an inspiration to many Namibians, remarked that while the then South African Prime Minister, P W Botha 'saw fit to call SWAPO a terrorist organisation, he himself was terrorising the whole of the sub-continent.'¹

The speeches, the celebration of Namibia Day, and the enduring armed struggle by guerrillas drawn from Namibia's small population of 1.5 million, underline both the determined nationalism that has motivated the long resistance to foreign occupation, and its continuity. The Nujoma message read by his substitute, Maxuilili, also emphasises the twenty years of interaction between on the one hand, the exiled body of SWAPO leaders and followers and on the other, the mass of membership and local leaders within Namibia. A major obstacle the Namibians have had to surmount has, however, been the indifference and ignorance regarding them that has enabled South Africa to keep the United Nations at bay for forty years, including the last twenty years of illegal occupation.

The twenty-year struggle towards independence led by SWAPO was inspired at the outset both by an acute sense of economic deprivation and racial oppression, and by the determination of Namibians in exile to recover their lost sovereignty. Much has been written of the extreme form of colonial exploitation which the South Africans have maintained, as successors to the Germans, for half a century.² It has been in defence of their own share in this exploitation that the USA, Britain and West Germany have constantly weakened efforts by the UN to bring it to an end: this aspect, too, has been studied with some thoroughness. The role of South Africa, both political and military, in Namibia is equally the subject of much analysis.³ This ground is not covered below, except in so far as it has a direct bearing on the theme of this article, the rise of SWAPO as a movement in exile. It is hoped that this chronological recital will convey some of the character of SWAPO, of the forces that have moulded that character, and of its impact on a world only too ready to ignore the intractable problem posed by South Africa's illegal occupation of Namibia.

¹ Namibia Communications Centre, London *Release*, Windhoek, 25 August 1986: 'Commemoration of Namibia Day in Windhoek'.

² See Tore Linné Eriksen, *The Political Economy of Namibia: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography*, Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1985. Two useful summaries are: R H Green, M L and K Kiljunen (eds), *Namibia. The Last Colony*, London: Longman, 1981; SWAPO Department of Publicity and Information, *To Be Born a Nation*, London: Zed Press, 1981.

³ Eriksen, *The Political Economy of Namibia*, pp 107-71, 244-56.

Origins of exile

The will to end their exile, even within the borders of South West Africa, was a driving force for the Hereros from the days of their destruction as a nation in 1904, by the Germans. The prayer of their aged chief, Hosea Kutako, whose life spanned both the German–Herero War of 1904–46, and the pre-Sharpeville Windhoek shootings of 1959, poignantly expressed the reality of their dispossession, first by the Germans and from 1915 by South Africa, then still a British dominion: ‘O Lord, help us who roam about. Help us who have been placed in Africa and have no dwelling place of our own. Give us back our dwelling place’.⁴ A few thousand Hereros escaped General von Trotha’s ‘extermination order’ of 1904 (recalled by Tlhabanelo at the Windhoek meeting), some of them taking up exile where their descendants remain, in what is now Botswana. In 1947 they asked the Reverend Michael Scott in South Africa to gather evidence among the Namibians remaining under South African rule to disprove the claim made to the United Nations by their rulers, that they were willing to be incorporated into South Africa. Thus, it was through the efforts of exiles that Namibians themselves were able to bring the issue of Namibia to the attention of the UN, despite the virtual imprisonment of the majority of their own country, and the exile of many more.

The rise of a sense of nationhood among the Namibians and of colonial independence throughout the world further stimulated resistance to South African rule. The Namibians knew themselves to be wards of the world community, whose duty it was to free them from the control of a power, mandated by the defunct League of Nations to administer their territory after the defeat of Germany in 1945. To the old oppression of contract labour, the denial of education, and a catalogue of economic hardships, was added the apartheid policy in 1948, which was to increase their burdens beyond endurance. Some, like the young railway worker Sam Nujoma, were first aroused to revolt by the realisation of the low value placed upon Namibians as human beings.⁵ Others, especially from Ovamboland in the north, were awakened by the discrimination against their fellow-workers in the labour market, which forced them to submit to paupers’ wages, brutal treatment and the total lack of rights through the hated contract labour system. Despite the denial of education and the harsh repression of

⁴ Michael Scott, *A Time to Speak*, London: Faber and Faber, 1958, p 266.

⁵ Liberation Support Movement (ed), *Namibia: SWAPO Rights for Freedom*, Oakland, California: LSM Information Center, 1978.

suspected 'trouble-makers', the workers' compounds became seed-beds for political growth in the 1950s.⁶

Some from the north broke their labour contracts and moved illegally into South Africa. In the still relatively liberal atmosphere of Cape Town in the late 1950s, one of them, Andimba Toivo ja Toivo, was to take the lead in forming the Ovamboland People's Congress, later part of the Ovamboland People's Organisation (opo) in Windhoek. The leaders, notably the President of opo and dynamic labour organiser, Sam Nujoma, were prominent in opposing the forced removal of residents of the Old Location in Windhoek to the new, apartheid-style 'townships' of Katutura. This opposition led to the events of 10 December 1959 in Windhoek, which left twelve peaceful demonstrators dead and forty-five injured in a hail of bullets. The organisers were subjected to imprisonment or banishment: Sam Nujoma was among those who escaped across the border.⁷

During 1960 many young political activists who had escaped from white-ruled South Africa were welcomed in Dar es Salaam, then the nearest independent African capital. A number of the Namibians among them appeared in New York soon afterwards, as petitioners who had followed Michael Scott to the United Nations. These early Namibian exiles were from the South West African National Union, (SWANU) founded by students in 1959, and from opo, renamed and reconstituted as the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in April 1960. SWANU was seen as sophisticated, perhaps elitist, and Peking-orientated; SWAPO as inexperienced, populist and non-aligned. Both were recognised internationally and were drawn into the 'Casablanca' or 'Monrovia' groupings with, for the most part, artificial doctrinal differences.

A clear line of demarcation was to appear in 1964, however, when the Liberation Committee of the newly formed Organisation of African Unity (OAU) put to each a straight question as to their preparedness to take up arms against the South Africans occupying their country. The unequivocal 'yes' from SWAPO led to its recognition, and SWANU's refusal to the withdrawal of OAU support.⁸ In the years that followed, this

⁶ Vinnia Ndadi, *Breaking Contract. The Story of Vinnia Ndadi*, Richmond, British Columbia: LSM Press, 1974, *passim*.

⁷ John Ya Otto, *Battlefront Namibia. An Autobiography*, London: Heinemann, 1981, pp 49–54.

⁸ Peter Katjavivi, 'The Rise of Namibian nationalism and its international dimensions', Unpublished D Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 1986, p 165. A different viewpoint can be seen in Richard Gibson, *African Liberation Movements: Contemporary Struggles against White Minority Rule*, London: Oxford University Press, 1972, pp 123–4.

recognition was justified by the growth of SWAPO to its present status as the 'sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people'⁹ in the eyes of the UN General Assembly and of the vast majority of its constituent member-states.

An initial congress of the party in 1960 had elected Nujoma President and Nathaniel Maxuilili, already a popular symbol of national resistance, Acting President in Nujoma's absence abroad. This policy was followed with other posts, the incumbent in exile always having an acting opposite number within the territory. The second Annual General Conference of the executive committee, held in Dar es Salaam in 1965, was concerned to improve communications with SWAPO headquarters in Windhoek, to tighten financial control as funds increased from the OAU, socialist countries and support groups in the West, and to streamline the functioning of the departments.¹⁰

The party in exile had made strides. Offices were established in Cairo and Algiers, and at the UN, with many more to follow. The leadership had undergone a hard apprenticeship, rapidly overcoming what might have been crippling disadvantages in terms of the Namibians' early isolation and lack of educational opportunities. Observers were impressed with the dedication, high principles and self-discipline displayed by most of the SWAPO leaders, qualities soon lost by many other exiled politicians. These leaders have survived two decades of exile, leaving others to return to Namibia on South Africa's terms.

The work of SWAPO in exile seemed in these early years to be a very minor affair compared to the momentous events in train among the UN member-states, whose judges at the International Court of Justice deliberated on Namibia's future. The issue had first come before the Hague Court as a result of South Africa's refusal initially to hand the territory over to the UN Trusteeship Council, and later even to acknowledge its duties under the League of Nations mandate. An Advisory Opinion favourable to Ethiopia and Liberia, who claimed the right as League members to seek a 'contentious judgment' on South West Africa, was followed in 1966 by calamity. The World Court reversed its earlier opinion, and years of argument were nullified as it ruled that Ethiopia and Liberia had no *locus standi* and that the case was thus inadmissible. The circumstances (in which the Australian presiding judge gave the casting vote destroying the case) were almost as

⁹ UN General Assembly Resolutions 3111 (1973), 31/146 (1976).

¹⁰ Katjavivi, *Rise of Namibian Nationalism*, p 164.

damaging to the reputation of the Court as to the object of the hearings. Those who had for years prevailed upon SWAPO to await the judgment of the Court as the first, essential step before the UN could prepare the Namibians for independence, were confounded. To SWAPO it immediately became clear, as Ja Toivo was to put it, that 'we could secure our freedom only by fighting for it.'¹¹

Launching the armed struggle

On 18 July 1966 Sam Nujoma announced that SWAPO had taken up arms against South Africa, proclaiming 'we must at once begin crossing the many rivers of blood on our march towards freedom.'¹² Training had begun earlier and in August 1966 the first units had penetrated northern Namibia through the Caprivi Strip, following the long trek from Tanzania. On 26 August 1966 an engagement with South African forces at Omgulumbashe led to the killing of two guerrillas and the capture of twenty-seven. The following May the guerrilla commander, Tobias Hainyeko, was killed in action crossing the Zambezi river. In 1968 the prisoners taken at Omgulumbashe and other internal leaders, including Ja Toivo, were by means of retrospective legislation, put on trial for their lives in Pretoria. Death sentences were narrowly averted as a result of world pressure and twenty-nine of the thirty-two were sent to Robben Island prison with long sentences, twenty of them for life.¹³

SWAPO had had a very short life inside Namibia before many of its leaders had escaped abroad. Conditions for its survival inside the territory were grim indeed. As in the dark post-Sharpeville years in South Africa, the security police in Namibia had a free hand in dealing with African political activists. There was, though, a difference: SWAPO did not suffer the bans which virtually closed down the ANC and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in South Africa for a dozen years. South Africa, while repudiating the League Mandate, paid lip-service to its provisions by concentrating its troops inside the 100 square miles of Walvis Bay, to which it laid territorial claim, and by allowing SWAPO and other smaller parties to exist. Their existence was made precarious, however, by the proscription of leaders such as Maxuileli, by the jailing of Ja Toivo and others, and by the repression in the Katutura compound outside Windhoek and in all urban locations. In the heavily populated

¹¹ *Statement*, Supreme Court of Republic of South Africa, Pretoria, 26 January 1968.

¹² *Statement*, SWAPO Provisional Headquarters, Dar es Salaam, 18 July 1966.

¹³ Andimba Ja Toivo was released unconditionally in 1984 as were the other prisoners at later dates. In 1985 Ja Toivo was elected, unopposed, to the vacant post of Secretary-General of SWAPO.

north, indirect rule was harshly maintained through traditional chiefs and councillors protected by armed bodyguards, together the enemies of the rural SWAPO activists.

Abroad, the handicaps were immense. In addition to a lack of training, experience and learning, their numbers were small: an important consultative conference held at Tanga in Tanzania in 1969, was attended by thirty members. Ignorance of their cause was so great that they had constantly to demand for it recognition other than as a South African minority issue. Yet they rose instantly to the military challenge presented by the World Court *débâcle*, and turned the disasters that followed into rallying calls for national regeneration. As with the establishment of 26 August as Namibia Day, the memory of their first commander, Hainyeko, as a national hero was kept alive, and the Namibians with Ja Toivo on Robben Island were remembered as symbols of sacrifice and suffering for the cause of freedom.

Their human calibre commended SWAPO to the governments of countries friendly to their cause. Military training schemes were agreed with Algeria, Egypt, Ghana, North Korea, the Soviet Union and Tanzania, the majority of personnel being trained in Africa. New African missions were established in Congo (Brazzaville), Ethiopia, Nigeria, Senegal, Zambia (to which Provisional Headquarters were moved at the end of the 1960s) and, following their independence, Angola and Zimbabwe. Luanda succeeded Lusaka as Provisional Headquarters in 1979. In Europe, offices were opened in Britain (where in 1969 after the Tanga conference, the UK representative, Peter Katjavivi, was additionally charged with maintaining contact with the leadership inside Namibia), East Germany, France, Romania, Sweden, West Germany and Yugoslavia. Offices in New Delhi and Melbourne more recently extended SWAPO's reach to all five continents.

South Africa's presence outlawed

Many countries—notably in the Caribbean, West and Central Africa and Scandinavia—have assisted SWAPO, despite the ostensible remoteness to some of them of the Namibian cause. The start of the armed struggle enhanced the status of SWAPO in some countries, but it took another great event to bring the case for Namibian freedom into focus for many more. The collapse of the case at the World Court in 1966 was acclaimed by South Africa as a victory. It also stung the UN General Assembly into terminating the League Mandate under

Resolution No. 2145 of that year, thereby placing the territory directly under the UN.

In 1967 the General Assembly, again without Security Council concurrence, set up the UN Council for Namibia as the *de jure* government of the territory, with a Commissioner as its executive, in 1968 renaming the territory Namibia. All these actions were belittled and rejected by South Africa's Western trading partners, which, with very few exceptions, did not apply to join the UN Council for Namibia. Britain, for one, still refuses to recognise the authority of the Council. Support for the measures taken by the General Assembly, and for Namibian independence as a popular issue, was lacking in many countries which have since developed popular links with SWAPO. Seeming to lack the courage of its convictions, the Assembly made no immediate attempt to fill the post of UN Commissioner for Namibia, and the Council appeared to have little purpose other than to undertake occasional 'safaris' to hear evidence from Namibians in exile and sundry experts on the issue.

At a time when African liberation movements were being corralled into one Cold War camp or the other, SWAPO was nominally in the 'Casablanca' group, together with the ANC of South Africa, FRELIMO of Mozambique, the MPLA of Angola and ZAPU of Southern Rhodesia. The party nevertheless maintained a highly distinctive non-aligned profile. It was as if the Namibians' long memory of foreign exploitation and a colonial oppression of singular harshness had bred a deep suspicion of the modern blandishments of powerful states. The SWAPO leaders, as Namibians the 'last at the feast' of modern development, perhaps felt themselves as yet ill-equipped to serve as equal partners with the imperial powers of East or West.

Rebuffed by the Americans and British, with whom they felt some affinity, SWAPO's leaders were apprehensive at the presumption of authority by the Soviet Union. An awareness that the African neighbours fighting for their own independence assumed that they were superior in numbers as well in education and experience fostered a degree of reserve towards the South African and Southern Rhodesian liberation movements. SWAPO thus maintained a separateness which helped to preserve the unity of its members while the other liberation movements in exile were often wracked with dissent. Yet, its isolation created its own problems. SWAPO was reluctantly obliged to depend for bases on newly-independent African states which had not undergone the bitter struggle facing the Namibians. From some Western bloc

leaders came scarcely veiled hostility. United Nations support was largely confined to the General Assembly. The Western permanent members of the Security Council held aloof.

As if, however, to redeem its disgrace in 1966, the World Court at the request of the Security Council gave a crucial Advisory Opinion in June 1971:

The continued presence of South Africa in Namibia being illegal, South Africa is under obligation to withdraw its administration from Namibia immediately (and) member states of the UN are under obligation to recognize the illegality of South Africa's presence in Namibia . . . and to refrain from any acts . . . implying recognition of the legality of (the) administration.¹⁴

Despite *in toto* dissent from the British and French judges, the illegality of the South African occupation was clearly established. In the succeeding years the Security Council performed its belated duty in supporting the earlier actions of the General Assembly. In 1974, the first UN Commissioner for Namibia was appointed. He was the redoubtable Mr Sean McBride, later a Nobel Peace Prize winner, who brought to the office a creativity that his successors have seldom managed to reproduce.¹⁵

The contract labour strike

The event which mobilised world opinion towards a genuine understanding of the Namibian cause was not directly brought about either by SWAPO or by the UN. At the turn of the years 1971–2, a national strike by the Namibian contract labour force was engendered by the same forces which had ensured an immediate following for SWAPO at its inception. The strikers were neither articulate publicists nor skilled negotiators, but SWAPO, with its network of offices abroad and its publicity and information channels, energetically promoted their cause throughout the world. The strikers were forcibly returned to the north and, though a pretence was made of meeting their demands, the changes were for the most part minimal. Their sacrifice did, however, bear fruit outside.

The student and intellectual community was turning increasingly

¹⁴ Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice, 21 June 1971 (from *Namibia: a Unique Responsibility*, New York: United Nations, 1983, p 10).

¹⁵ *Decree No. 1 for the Protection of the Natural Resources of Namibia*, UN Council for Namibia, New York, 27 September 1974.

towards working-class interests and socialist loyalties, a trend which operated strongly in SWAPO's favour, provoking a heartening response to the exiled leaders' efforts. A Namibian International Conference held in Brussels in 1972 was enthusiastically supported by SWAPO's new constituency, in which support groups, new friends and valuable contacts rapidly proliferated. Above all, SWAPO, both in exile and internally, was put on the map. Here was a text-book example of a major worker's strike against a colonial-type oppressor. In support of this strike was a liberation movement with impeccable proletarian credentials, largely free of the bourgeois elements so often to be found in the forefront of similar movements.

The contract labour strike, the 1971 Advisory Opinion and SWAPO's active campaigning on both issues helped to create an atmosphere conducive to action by the UN. In 1972-3 the Secretary-General, Dr Kurt Waldheim, and his representative, Dr Alfred Escher, visited Namibia and South Africa for talks with the South Africans and, to a much lesser extent, the Namibians. The initiative petered out and events surrounding SWAPO and its guerrillas (by now known as the People's Liberation Army of Namibia, or PLAN) began to revive the long process towards independence which was properly the historical and moral responsibility of the UN.

Internal resurgence, 1972-4

The infiltration of PLAN into northern Namibia threatened the power and credibility of the South African administration of Namibia to a degree that seems out of all proportion to the 'kill rate' or military successes of the insurgents. Much of the attack was directed against the traditional, government-supporting chiefs in Ovamboland, with whom the real battle for popular allegiance was being fought. News of PLAN actions quickly reached Windhoek and other population centres south of what was already becoming known as the War Zone. SWAPO support grew, especially among the young, who, ahead of their brothers in the Rand townships of South Africa, were becoming the spearhead of political attack on the South African occupation.

In 1972-4 SWAPO rallies and meetings in Katutura and Ovamboland were answered with harsh repression. The public flogging by tribal courts in Ovamboland of young SWAPO leaders, both men and women (totally unjustified, by any tradition of such vicious punishments, despite South African claims to the contrary), brought the state of

affairs in Namibia into the world headlines, and to the attention of the UN, which demanded that these punishments cease. The SWAPO national chairman, David Meroro, was held and tortured: as with the floggings, one object was to prove links with PLAN which would justify the suppression of SWAPO internally, despite its status at the UN. The other object, of course, was to defeat PLAN, thus restoring the authority of the chiefs and of the South African regime behind them. In this way the indirect-rule, 'Bantustan' policy of apartheid could be developed in Namibia, whereby no fewer than eleven 'Native nations' would occupy less than half of the land surface, the whites retaining the major share. In 1975 the assassination, allegedly by PLAN cadres, of South Africa's main instrument in Ovamboland, the Chief Minister, Chief Philemon Elifas, was followed by a reign of terror among SWAPO supporters throughout Namibia which was reminiscent of the cruelties of the German colonial days.

SWAPO campaigned internationally for the defence of its officials, Aaron Mushimba and Hendrik Shikongo. The State nevertheless demanded—and initially achieved—the death penalty for their alleged connection with Elifas's killers. Special Branch filching of defence documents was, however, dramatically exposed almost at the last moment and the case was dismissed by the Appeal Court in South Africa. David Soggot, defence counsel in the Mushimba-Shikongo case wrote:

What was intended to strike a blow at the heart of Namibian nationalism ultimately strengthened it. The release of Mushimba, Shikongo and the two nurses was greeted by jubilant crowds in Windhoek. It was seen as a victory for SWAPO and the Namibian nationalist cause.¹⁶

The enthusiasm for SWAPO was also heightened by events north of the Kunene river, where, on 25 April 1974, the Portuguese flag was hauled down after nearly 500 years of dominating Angola. Inspired by this gain, numbers of committed young Namibians, many of them SWAPO Youth Leaguers, were ready to follow the example of the men and women of the early 1960s by continuing the struggle in exile.

External revolt

The opening of the Angolan border, a totally artificial one for the Kwanyama people who live on either side of it, transformed the

¹⁶ David Soggot, *Namibia, the Violent Heritage*, London: Rex Collings, 1986, pp 151–62.

opportunities both for PLAN, now able to penetrate the north through the Angola route, and for Namibians leaving their country. Within a matter of a few months nearly 4,000 people, perhaps 20 per cent of them women, made their way out of the country, many to join up with SWAPO in Lusaka, others as refugees from the horrors of the South African military presence in the north.

The problems for the SWAPO officials in Lusaka were immense and their resources limited. There was also plainly a lack of imagination in their handling of the hot-blooded young men and women who had been in the forefront of the struggle in Windhoek and the other towns. These people had developed sophisticated political ideas and strategies virtually unknown to the first exiles of 1960, and they expected to be welcomed and accepted into the party's highest councils. As well as lacking proper accommodation and provisions, many of the Youth Leaguers took offence at the failure of the leadership to recognise their status. When stories of discontent in the PLAN camps reached the Youth Leaguers in Lusaka, and they found one or two of the old leaders willing to stand with them, the situation became extremely volatile.

Andreas Shipanga, Secretary for Information and Publicity, seemed the leader the Youth Leaders needed and, though with motives deemed by a later enquiry to be very different from their own, encouraged their revolt. The threat was defused by rapid action on the part of the Zambian Government, partly aimed at averting the kind of situation they had faced during a ZANU rebellion which had led to the assassination of the Secretary-General, Herbert Chitepo. Nine of the leaders, including Shipanga and the Secretary for Labour, Solomon Mifima, both original members of the OPC in Cape Town, were flown to Tanzania where no *habeas corpus* writ could be served. There they spent two years in detention. Six hundred of the rank-and-file Youth League rebels were rehabilitated while others chose not to return to SWAPO and were cared for by the UN High Commission for Refugees.

The rebellion had been successfully contained and the leaders imprisoned and neutralised. SWAPO's enemies, especially in Western capitals, made much of the incident, however, and Shipanga emerged from prison in 1978 to a hero's welcome in Britain and West Germany. A man of much urbanity and charm, Shipanga's popularity was high in the West, where the bluntness and apparent lack of fitness of Nujoma was held against him by politicians and diplomats who liked their African counterparts to be good company as well as good leaders. Yet at home in Namibia, the tenacity, dedication and integrity of Sam Nujoma

survived constant onslaughts of adverse South African propaganda (and the almost obsessional desire of Prime Minister Vorster to bring him down), and SWAPO's rise continued unchecked. Shipanga's rival SWAPO-Democrats, which he led on his return to Namibia in 1979, failed to fulfil the promise of his Western backers' imaginings.

SWAPO was abused for the detentions and the relatively peaceful quelling of the revolt. No credit has been given for the Commission of Inquiry it held, perhaps because news of it had very limited circulation, within a virtually closed circle. The commission was chaired by John Ya Otto, a Central Committee member and former SWAPO official in Namibia, from which he had escaped during the great exodus. Ya Otto was to succeed Mifima as Secretary for Labour.¹⁷

While not directly addressing itself to the problems of absorbing the new arrivals from the Youth League, the Ya Otto Report dealt unequivocally with many other failings that were bound to be endemic in a movement so many years in exile. These failings ranged from the need for a new constitution and political programme to 'complacency, sheer laziness and lack of sense of urgency on the part of those in positions of leadership'. Among many other recommendations was that to eliminate 'the dichotomy between the political and military wings . . . all SWAPO members are soldiers. As a rule all SWAPO officials should spend at least two months a year at the front.' While the last sentence is unlikely to have been put into effect, the concept of the integration of the military and political functions in SWAPO was sensibly reiterated.

SWAPO's new programme

A new 'Constitution and Political Programme'¹⁸ did result, its publication preceding and upstaging South Africa's own puppet programme, propagated in the same year by the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance. The 'Discussion Paper' of 1975 setting out liberal ideals for a future constitution was followed, and to a great extent superseded, by the Political Programme agreed at the Nampundwe conference in 1976. The new Political Programme rectified the weakness that the Ya Otto commission had identified in the relationship of PLAN to the Executive, by formally constituting a Department of Defence and Transport, to

¹⁷ Katjavivi, *Rise of Namibian Nationalism* pp 396–401.

¹⁸ *Constitution of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) and Political Programme of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO)*, Lusaka: SWAPO Department of Information and Publicity, 1976. Current editions: Luanda, 1983.

whose Secretary (the late Peter Nanyemba) PLAN's commanders and Military Council reported.

The new Political Programme pledged SWAPO to 'unite all Namibian people, particularly the working class, the peasantry and progressive intellectuals into a vanguard party capable of safeguarding national independence and of building a classless, non-exploitative society based on the ideals and principles of scientific socialism'.¹⁹ Though now using the phraseology of Marxism, SWAPO had not strayed from the main aims of the OPO Constitution, among which were 'to secure and maintain the complete unity of the people of Ovamboland, Hereroland and Namaland' and 'to promote the political, social and economic emancipation of the people, more particularly those who depend directly upon their own exertion by hand, or by brain, for the means of life.'²⁰

The teachings of Marx, Lenin and Mao which accompanied much of the training in the socialist countries were expounded in the camps by Political Commissars, full members of the Military Council that reported to the Executive Committee or to the President as Commander-in-Chief. The Namibians had grown up with exploitation at its worst in the contract labour system, and had imbibed the egalitarian principles of Christianity in a country where the masses worshipped the living Christ. They were thus ready for those high principles of Marxism that spread so rapidly through Southern Africa in the 1970s.

SWAPO in exile interacted not only with its Namibian-based counterpart, but with church leaders, some of whom also sought or were driven into exile. Three Anglican Bishops were exiled in succession, Bishops Mize, Winter and Wood, the latter two making a particular deep impression on SWAPO with their Christian commitment. Black clergy were imprisoned and tortured. Lutheran leaders such as Bishop Auala and Bishop Dumeni confronted the illegal occupiers only to see their church property destroyed for their pains. Pastor Hendrik Witbooi and the American Methodist Episcopalian church leaders, Karuaera and Tjirimuje, brought an estimated 32,000 Namibians into the SWAPO fold, the present Catholic and Anglican Bishops and other leaders, black and white, were or are members or close allies of SWAPO. SWAPO,

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *Constitution of the Ovamboland People's Organisation*, Windhoek, 1959, 'Aims and Objects', pp 3, 6.

in turn, has valued the role of the Namibian churches at home, in the camps and abroad, whatever the materialism of Marxism may prescribe.

Consolidating the exodus

The great exodus of 1974 and onwards brought most of its participants into SWAPO's Health and Education Centres in Zambia and Angola. Nyango, the first of these, a farm given to SWAPO by the Zambian government in the early 1970s, had a population of 5,000 by 1978, with its own hospital. Many more were settled in Kwanza Sul in Angola, where schools, craft centres, and clinics were run largely by women refugees, most of the able-bodied men—and some women—undergoing military training. Many others went abroad as students under UN or Commonwealth schemes, to Britain, Cuba, Jamaica, Malta, Sierra Leone, and elsewhere. Among other local projects, the International Labour Organisation has opened a vocational training school, and the Norwegian Namibiaforeniging a secondary technical school (at Loudima in Congo Brazzaville). Also, a distance-learning literacy programme is in operation in the Angolan centres, partly financed by the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation.

The figure of 80,000 is quoted as the number of Namibians under SWAPO's control in Zambia and Angola—a major responsibility, not least in the realm of security. The first main SWAPO refugee centre was established outside a small mining town called Kassinga, at what was thought to be a safe distance, more than 150 miles north of the Namibian border. At the time of the troubles in Lusaka in 1974, there was relatively slow progress in the international arena. The UN Commissioner, Sean MacBride, greatly hastened the pace of development of the future Namibia by instituting in 1976 both the Nationhood Programme to prepare for government by Namibians, and the UN Institute for Namibia (UNIN) in Lusaka, to accelerate the training of Namibians in many administrative skills, as well as for remedial basic education programmes. Under the direction of SWAPO's former representative at the UN, Hage Geingob²¹ UNIN was essential to combat the demoralisation and neglect of education within Namibia, observable in many of the refugees and exiles.

²¹ *Namibia: Perspectives for National Reconstruction and Development*, Lusaka: UN Institute for Namibia, 1986.

Internal survival

Within Namibia the South African regime, anxious as always to buy time rather than face the imminent future, set about a new dispensation. SWAPO had held a national congress in Walvis Bay in May 1976, which confirmed the exiled leadership despite a propaganda offensive by the Administration. It was essential to render SWAPO politically harmless, and a number of South Africa's nominees were duly convened to meet in conclave in a Windhoek gymnasium called the Turnhalle to produce a new internal settlement. From the elections held in 1978 until it reached the height of its influence in 1980, the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) worked hard to capture the initiative from SWAPO. Despite huge unattributed expenditures in vote-buying and the unconcealed support of the new Administrator-General, Judge M T Steyn, whose mistaken appointment had been intended as a sop to the West, SWAPO's support did not cease to grow. Even Afrikaner Nationalist sources estimated at the end of 1978 that the curiously precise figures of 83 per cent of Namibians identified themselves with SWAPO.²²

SWAPO was said to be dominated by Ovambos, who would oppress an independent Namibia if South Africa did not save the non-Ovambo half of the African population from this fate. Yet in 1977 Pastor Karuaera and Pastor Tjirimuje brought in an entire section of the Herero people, who had broken with Hosea Kutako's successor, Clemens Kapuuu. Once an ally of SWAPO, Kapuuu was keeping very suspect foreign company at the time of his assassination in 1978 (despite South Africa's accusations of SWAPO's complicity in his murder his family have rejected this suggestion).²³ These 17,000 Hereros, whose Association for the Preservation of the Tjamuaha-Maharero Royal House was disbanded, followed the four main Nama communities, under their traditional supreme chief, Pastor Hendrik Witbooi, great-grandson of Hendrik Witbooi who had led his people against the Germans with great valour and skill. Witbooi accepted the vice-presidency of SWAPO. All three men were able to travel out of Namibia and meet the SWAPO leaders and their friends abroad, receiving a wider and warmer public welcome than that accorded to the large party of DTA emissaries sent to the USA and Europe in an unsuccessful attempt to win support for the new regime.

²² Ivan Himmelhoch, 'ex-boss agent', *The Star* (Johannesburg) 21 August 1980 (in Soggot, *Namibia, The Violent Heritage*, p 285).

²³ Katjavivi, *Rise of Namibian Nationalism*, pp 257–8.

By 1983, P W Botha's Government had realised that continued support for the DTA was equivalent to throwing good money after bad, and despite vociferous protests from its most ambitious front man, the acknowledged leader of the white members of the Turnhalle, Mr Dirk Mudge (or 'Mudgorewa' to pro-SWAPO observers of the somewhat parallel Rhodesia-Zimbabwe situation), the Turnhalle chapter was closed, another victim of SWAPO's 'mysterious vitality'.²⁴

SWAPO's abiding success in Namibia could be attributed only in part to the work of its leaders at home. The regime made it as difficult as possible for them to operate. The acting President, Maxuilili, was under a seemingly perpetual banning order in Swakopmund. Bredan Simbwaye, first vice-president, leader of the Caprivi African National Union, with which SWAPO had merged in 1964, had been abducted back to Namibia and had there simply disappeared. Many officials, of whom the outstanding figure was Axel Johannes, had endured appalling periods of solitary confinement and torture. Weaker brethren were subject to bribes and blackmail which are hard to resist where the basic necessities of life are often only in the gift of the white man.

The endurance of so many SWAPO men and women was heroic, but they were sustained by the knowledge that throughout the world, and above all at the UN, there existed SWAPO offices with fellow Namibians working for their liberation, caring for the host of exiles (comprising a significant number within Namibia's 1.5 million population) offering education and training denied them at home. Similarly, in the bush and grasslands of Namibia were the freedom fighters, sacrificing everything in the fight against 'the Boers' occupying their country as the Germans had before them.

From Resolution 385 to 'linkage'

The protracted processes of the UN led at last to recognition by the Security Council of the illegality of South Africa's occupation of Namibia, and under Resolution 385 of 1976, to the demand for its withdrawal. This development was the product of many factors which had weakened South Africa's standing with its Western allies. The Afrikaner Nationalist Government had been forced onto the defensive by the Soweto uprisings of 1976, the first sign of losing the control that had been maintained ruthlessly since 1963 with the aftermath of the

²⁴ Soggot, *Namibia, The Violent Heritage*, p 179.

Sharpeville Emergency. The withdrawal of South Africa's invading column from an advanced position in Angola in 1975, and the US's moral vulnerability following Vietnam and Watergate, helped to create a conjunction of forces which instigated progress in the long haul towards Namibian independence.

Though the Western powers supported UNSCR 385, they twice vetoed General Assembly measures aimed at enforcing it. Partly to avoid a third such 'triple veto', Andrew Young of the US Carter Administration, together with Dr David Owen, Britain's Labour Foreign Secretary, and their colleagues from France, West Germany and Canada, set about an initiative aimed at accomplishing South African withdrawal. These efforts would have failed in their aims had the strength of SWAPO's exiled leadership and its solidarity with the party inside Namibia not been incontrovertibly proven to the Western 'Five', all Security Council members at the time. Their acceptance of SWAPO as a negotiating partner could by no means have been taken for granted. SWAPO had long been the target of a series of dismissive charges by Western politicians and journalists: the Namibians must be saved from the Ovambo domination of SWAPO; external SWAPO was at odds with the 'internal wing'; Ja Toivo, on Robben Island, was the true leader and the membership considered Nujoma a usurper; PLAN actions in the war zone had alienated the local people; SWAPO was a Soviet catspaw; SWAPO was undemocratic and would force itself on Namibia undemocratically and create a one-party state. Most insidiously, SWAPO it was claimed, did not represent the Namibians at all and the erroneous nature of the 'sole and authentic representative' title conferred by the General Assembly obliged the Western powers to show equal favour to the numerous small parties whose existence the Turnhalle exercise had preserved. (In Southern Rhodesia, by contrast, the insurgents were constantly berated for their failure to speak with one voice but separately as ZANU and ZAPU.)²⁵

The single, major liberation movement of Namibia, whose members had fought and died in the war zone, or suffered cruelly at the hands of police and military gaolers and torturers, and which had represented the Namibians to the outside world for more than fifteen years was abused for claiming to speak for the Namibians. It must share its negotiating status with splinter groups and collaborators with South Africa. Paradoxically, SWAPO had repeatedly shown its willingness to enter into

²⁵ Namibia Information Service, London, *Releases*.

alliances with groups of smaller movements at home, refusing only, as with the DTA, when such groups were blatantly creations of the South African regime.

The Five were now obliged to reverse their former dismissal of SWAPO and to proceed with negotiations. SWAPO, in turn, had to respond despite misgivings at the transfer of responsibility away from the UN to five of South Africa's main trading partners. The Five achieved early success and by 1978 had extracted agreement from both SWAPO and South Africa to the terms of what became UNSCR 435; the prescription, in very vague outline, for South Africa's withdrawal from Namibia.

Any secret hopes that South Africa might be concerned other than to deceive the Five by a show of negotiation were destroyed when South African paratroopers attacked the 'safe' and hence undefended refugee camp at Kassinga on 4 May 1978, killing 600 Namibians and wounding 1,000. The victims were largely women and children. Kassinga's name was added to the calendar of solemn Namibian days of re-dedication. The Western media, despite early reports and later UN confirmation of the nature of the raid, largely ignored this monstrous South African crime.²⁶

Delays, prevarication, and dissimulation by South Africa over the status of Walvis Bay, the number and location of SWAPO bases, the numbers of their own troops, de-militarised zones, and election processes were followed early in 1981 by a so-called 'pre-implementation' UN conference in Geneva. The DTA and their South African advisers were anxious to procrastinate while the new Reagan Administration formulated a policy on which they pinned high hopes.

The DTA successfully nullified all discussions by demanding an end to 'UN bias' towards SWAPO before any further steps could be taken. They had successfully played for time: the Reagan Administration duly rewarded South Africa by an act amounting to unprincipled treachery. In 1982 Vice-President George Bush, on an African tour, formally endorsed the 'linkage' of Cuban troop withdrawals from Angola to South Africa's departure from Namibia. The departure of the Cubans was to be a 'pre-condition' (and as such was eagerly seized upon by South Africa) for the implementation of Resolution 435.²⁷

²⁶ *Remember Kassinga: Fact Paper on Southern Africa No. 9*. London: International Defence and Aid Fund, 1981; *To Be Born a Nation* (see Note 2 above), pp 242-3.

²⁷ *Vice-President George Bush: A New Partnership with Africa*, Washington DC: US Information Service, 1982.

SWAPO's misgivings towards the Five were sadly proved to have been justified. South Africa's continued presence in Namibia was virtually guaranteed by Reagan's 'constructive engagement' policy towards South Africa, reinforced by 'linkage', however many shuttles, rounds of talks and missions Reagan's emissary, Dr Chester Crocker, might indulge in. 'Linkage' heralded the bleak period of the mid-1980s. Events in Namibia were almost totally obscured by the dramatic scenes of insurrection in South Africa. Namibia was nowhere mentioned in the report of the Eminent Persons Group (7 June 1986) to the Commonwealth Heads of Government. SWAPO was itself subject to a well-orchestrated attack from South African-financed offices abroad, which were promoting its latest 'internal settlement' move, the Transitional Government of National Unity formed out of the Multi-Party Conference, successors to the DTA.

South Africa's new offensive has not been exclusively directed at PLAN militarily, and internal and external SWAPO politically. Linked to the new attack is the story of the recent uncovering of agents infiltrated into PLAN and the camps, many of them broken by blackmail or threats to family hostages. SWAPO's neutralising of the agents is bad for South Africa but already the propaganda composed of stories of SWAPO's response is yielding dividends of another sort.

The SWAPO leaders in exile and at home, and the growing numbers of young trained men and women serving with them are not dismayed by the latest version of the long campaign to traduce their organisation. They have, despite a reservoir of good will towards the West at the outset, come to expect betrayal, neglect and contempt from, in particular, the USA, Britain and West Germany. Just as putting burglars in charge of the silver would be, entrusting the Five with negotiations for their independence from South Africa was never less than a source of the deepest distrust for SWAPO.²⁸

Yet, despite repeated accusations of intransigence against President Sam Nujoma and his able Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Theo-Ben Gurirab, SWAPO has, usually under pressure from the Frontline States, made concessions in order to allow the negotiating process to continue. To give but one example: at Lusaka in 1984, SWAPO endured a further

²⁸ Among the most glaring, almost symbolic, justifications for such distrust is the management by the Rio Tinto Zinc Corporation of the Rössing uranium mine and the supply of uranium to British Nuclear Fuels, in clear defiance of UN Decree No. 1 of the UN Council for Namibia, which forbids such export, except under licence. See Alun Roberts, *The Rössing File: The Inside Story of Britain's Secret Contract for Namibian Uranium*, London: Namibia Support Committee Campaign Against the Namibian Uranium Contracts, 1980, pp 34-8.

meeting with South Africa's 'internal settlement' collaborators, jointly chaired by President Kaunda and South Africa's Administrator-General, which was as pointless as its predecessor at Geneva. When sections of the Multi-Party Conference (the radical wing of SWANU, and the Damara Chiefs Council) chose to sit with SWAPO as one bloc, SWAPO yielded yet again to pressure and agreed to negotiate alone.

SWAPO's ceasefire offer is almost permanently on the table, and was reiterated in Vienna on 7 July 1986. Addressing the UN International Conference for the Immediate Independence of Namibia, President Sam Nujoma said:

Already in 1978, I signed and deposited a letter with the Office of the Secretary-General, expressing SWAPO's readiness, which I have repeated several times since, to sign a cease-fire with Pretoria as a first step in the implementation of Resolution 435. As we approach August 1, which is offered [by South Africa] as a possible date for implementing the UN Plan, I wish to state, once again, that SWAPO is ready, provided that no irrelevant and diversionary elements are introduced.

Cease-fire letters had long since been prepared by the UN Secretary-General's office for the signature of both SWAPO and Pretoria. Pretoria's letter remains, of course, unsigned and 1 August 1986 has come and gone—another meaningless date in the twenty years of deception and stalling since the termination of the League Mandate, or the ten years since UNSCR 385. The record should be closely studied by those who would like to believe that, in South Africa, Pretoria will seriously negotiate with SWAPO's old ally, the African National Congress. Western attempts at negotiations with South Africa over the apartheid crisis which has intensified since 1984 have been exposed in all their futility. SWAPO's decision of twenty years ago to take up arms has now, in principle, been vindicated.

SWAPO's preparedness to make concessions should be interpreted not as weakness but as the strength drawn from the certainty of its unassailable position in Namibia, twenty-six years after its executive went into exile. Its parallel organisation outside the country, President, Central Committee, PLAN, Youth League, Women's Council, Elders' Council and the National Union of Namibian Workers, has maintained high morale through the long years of exile. The capacity to endure was hard earned by the parents and grandparents of the present leaders, and they know that, despite their unceasing demands for immediate independence and their relative readiness for it, time is unquestionably on their side.

Sam Nujoma, as a small child, saw South African bombers flying overhead on their way to bomb the capital of the patriot northern chief, Ipumbu Tshilongo, in 1932. The old people of that time had lived most of their lives before the Germans colonised central and southern Namibia. The century since that disastrous event was aptly commemorated in 1984 with conferences in London and at the United Nations. In the end the illegal South African occupation will cease and the first of SWAPO's stated objectives will be met: 'to fight relentlessly by all possible means, for the immediate and total liberation of Namibia from colonial and imperialist occupation.'²⁹

SWAPO's growth from the mustard seed of 1960 to its present influence and position—UN observer status, full diplomatic recognition by the Non-Aligned States, its links with the Commonwealth and membership of UN agencies as well as regional bodies such as the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC)—has not been achieved without a daring and determination not commonly found in long-exiled liberation movements. Interaction with 'internal SWAPO' had assisted the process, and so, even more, has the commitment to the armed struggle, now in its twenty-first year of 'low intensity' warfare, by tying up 100,000 South African and Namibian troops and conscripts. At the Vienna conference, Sam Nujoma linked their struggle with the 'grave situation now facing our comrades, brothers and sisters in South Africa, who are courageously fighting and dying, under the leadership of the African National Congress, to end apartheid and replace it with a just, democratic and non-racial society . . . on the principle of one person, one vote'. He asked the conference whether the world was going to allow the Botha regime 'a repeat performance' of its treatment of its own citizens under the State of Emergency in South Africa. Would the South Africans continue to have a free hand in killing citizens of the black majority in Namibia by 'turning off all the lights' through the intimidation of foreign and local press?' He continued:

The answer is no. Nazism and fascism were defeated not by any constructive engagement or shuttle diplomacy. The world declared war, mobilised human and material resources worldwide and brought Hitler and his followers to their knees. That is the answer.

He reminded the Europeans and Americans that 'Africans crossed over the oceans and died to save Europe from Nazism.' Perhaps recalling the exploits of Afrikaner Nazis such as Robey Leibbrandt, who was

²⁹ *Constitution* (1983), 'Aims and Objectives', B(1).

brought from Nazi Germany to South Africa via the Namaqualand coast in 1941, he juxtaposed African servicemen (such as Secretary-General Ja Toivo and the Secretary of the SWAPO Elders Council, Simon Kaukungua) against 'the Afrikaner terrorists, whom you are today supporting and honouring'. They 'also came over, on the side of Hitler, killing your people and occupying your lands. Fascism is fascism, whether the victims are white or black.'³⁰ In such a statement can be seen the nature of SWAPO's ultimate requirement of the nations of the world, whose ward in international law their country remains. Its spirit also informs SWAPO's acceptance of the fact that, should their requirement not be met, and should the Namibians continue to be forgotten, they must fight on alone.

³⁰ *Address* by Comrade Sam Nujoma, President of SWAPO, UN International Conference for the Immediate Independence of Namibia, Vienna, 7–11 July 1986, pp 12–13.