

Turning Point in Namibia

★ A CRITICAL turning point has been reached in the struggle for majority rule in Namibia. Actions taken in the next few weeks may dictate whether there can be a negotiated settlement of the long conflict between South Africa and the international community (represented by the United Nations), or whether there will be a protracted struggle involving guerrilla warfare through the liberation forces of SWAPO (South West African People's Organization) and possible comprehensive sanctions against South Africa by most nations of the world. Also at stake in the decisions to be made now will be the credibility, particularly in Africa, of the United States and its Western allies.

From 1920 on, Namibia (South West Africa) was administered by South Africa under a mandate from the League of Nations. South Africa had taken control of the territory from Germany after Germany's defeat in World War I. With the establishment of the United Nations in 1946, all mandated territories were transferred to the trusteeship system of the U.N., whose aim was to lead the countries to independence. However, South Africa refused to place Namibia under that system and continued to administer the territory under the mandate arrangement of the defunct League of Nations.

The United Nations has had to deal with the issue as pressures both internally in Namibia and internationally have made it unavoidable. There are rich mineral deposits in Namibia. Fishing is also a profitable enterprise. And yet the people of Namibia, numbering less than a million, have been exploited under a system of contract labor. About 13 per cent of the population is white, and the apartheid structure of South Africa has been adapted to Namibia. The minority of whites has profited at the expense of the vast black majority.

The struggle for majority rule in Namibia has proceeded on two levels. One has been essentially a legal battle involving the United Nations and the International Court of Justice. Theoretically the legal controversy was ended in 1971 when the International Court found that South Africa was illegally occupying the territory. The Security Council had terminated South Africa's mandate over Namibia the year before.

The other level of struggle has been internal. The largest and most effective of the nationalist movements demanding independence is SWAPO, now recognized by the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity as the legitimate representative of the Namibian people. The struggle against South African control and against the system of apartheid has taken many forms, both nonviolent and violent. But since 1966 SWAPO has put increasing emphasis on the necessity of the armed struggle for liberation,

and this activity has become more intense as South Africa has increased its military force in Namibia to an estimated 50,000 men and has taken an intransigent position with regard to the United Nations demand for a transition to independence. The effort has further been strengthened with the independence in southern Africa of Mozambique and particularly of Angola, just to the north of Namibia.

I

The recent developments leading to the historical turning point in Namibia can be said to have begun at the U.N. with the unanimous passage of Security Resolution 385 on January 30, 1976. That document called for free elections in Namibia under the "supervision and control of the United Nations" so that the people could decide their own future.

Presumably to implement this resolution, and in line with the Carter administration's own initiatives on southern Africa, the U.S. last April proposed to the Security Council a plan jointly backed by the other Western members of the U.N. Security Council (Britain, France, Canada and West Germany). It contained proposals for ending hostilities during a transition period and for limiting South African troops to 1,500, to be restricted to clearly prescribed areas. It also contained a timetable for elections and made provisions for a U.N. military and civilian force to see that the agreement was strictly followed. Political prisoners were to be released and exiled leaders allowed to return to participate in the process leading up to elections. The entire undertaking was to be overseen by a U.N. special representative.

South Africa indicated acceptance of this proposal on April 25. Two and a half months later, after a meeting of the five Western countries, SWAPO and the frontline states of Africa (Tanzania, Zambia, Botswana, Mozambique and Angola), an announcement was made that all were ready to proceed with implementation of the Security Council proposal. Everything looked good for a rapid agreement leading to elections under U.N. supervision. The secretary general of the U.N. appointed his special representative for Namibia, a U.N. task force visited the territory for three weeks in August to draw up detailed proposals, and the secretary general presented his plan to the Security Council for final implementation.

But trouble was in store. South Africa rejected certain aspects of the secretary general's plan — such as a U.N. force of 7,500 to keep order in Namibia during the transition period, and a postponement of a date for elections beyond December 31, 1978. The postponement was deemed necessary because in order to carry out the U.N. and the Western plan, an estimated seven months were required for adequate preparation.

In the meantime, South Africa permitted registra-

tion for an internal election to take place in December completely without U.N. supervision. One indication of how this move was perceived in Namibia is the letter a group of six clergy (representing Protestant and Catholic bodies) wrote to the South African prime minister on October 8:

It is clear to us that if the elections are held in Namibia this year they will take place without the participation of the U.N. and the majority of political parties. We do not see how this can in any way reduce the growing frustration and resentment which already plagues human relations inside and outside this country. . . . We feel compelled to caution that . . . you will be held responsible worldwide for the escalation of an avoidable, terrible, and tragic war in this country.

II

The situation at this writing is that SWAPO, the U.N., and the African states represented by the frontline countries have all accepted a procedure which would allow a U.N. body to maintain order and supervise elections in Namibia, and which would even permit a limited South African military and administrative force to remain during a transition period. South Africa has rejected this proposal and has unilaterally proceeded with plans for an election without SWAPO participation or release of political prisoners.

Unless there is some change in South Africa's position, confrontation will continue, moving to a more serious level than when the issue primarily took the form of legal jockeying or debate by diplomats in the halls of the United Nations. Now the conflict involves a clash of military forces. SWAPO has a trained force of several thousand guerrillas — some inside the country and some in adjacent countries, especially Angola. South Africa has an overwhelming military force and is willing to employ it, as indicated by its attack on a SWAPO camp at Cassinga in southern Angola last spring which killed more than 600 people. The Soviet and Cuban support for SWAPO and presence in Angola bring in larger international issues. The confrontation also raises anew the question of comprehensive international sanctions against South Africa.

When the new Western initiative began in 1976, the African states watched with skepticism. After all, these were the same states that had been allied with Portugal. They are the chief investors in and trading partners with South Africa. But soon the African states became interested in this initiative. They saw merit in the Western proposal of April 1978. Practically speaking, they saw the possibility of the West's having influence on South Africa, thus making it possible to reach a negotiated settlement leading to independence in Namibia with U.N. participation. Therefore, the African states accepted the role of the five Western countries, and themselves applied pressure on SWAPO to accept some

rather basic compromises such as not insisting that Namibia's one seaport, Walvis Bay, be recognized officially by South Africa as part of Namibia (South Africa claims the port for itself). SWAPO also has to accept a transition role for the resident police forces and the continued presence of a South Africa military contingent.

South Africa has moved ahead with its own sponsored elections in early December without U.N. involvement. A body has been chosen; its responsibilities, though not clearly defined, may include preparatory work for a constitution for a supposedly independent Namibia. In effect, the whole exercise amounts to an "internal" solution which has shocking parallels to that in Rhodesia.

By proceeding with the elections unilaterally, South Africa has ensured that the course is set for a continued clash of forces both internally (SWAPO will wage an intensified struggle against a South African-sponsored regime) and internationally — with economic sanctions called for. Will the West veto a resolution calling for these sanctions? The African states have prevailed on SWAPO to accept the U.N. role leading to elections for a freely chosen assembly to eventuate in an independent Namibia. The Western countries have not been able to prevail on South Africa to comply. Internal and international conflict may continue for years to come, with Western powers in a compromised position and with little credibility in Africa unless South Africa accepts the one avenue to a peaceful and negotiated settlement by allowing U.N. supervision and control of free elections.

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