



# American Committee On Africa

198 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10038 / (212) 962-1210 / Cable AMCOMMAF

12 January 1983

To: ACOA Friends  
From: Jennifer Davis  
Re: Some notes from southern Africa

After months of effort, our Projects Director, Dumisani Kumalo, managed a brief visit with his parents, who traveled from South Africa to Botswana at the end of December to see him. Writing from Zimbabwe, as the year ended, he has some very interesting insights which I am happy to share with you.





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Harare, December 1982

There are two ways to get to Botswana from the U.S.--either one flies from Johannesburg, South Africa, or from Harare, Zimbabwe. I flew from Harare for obvious reasons, not wanting to end up in Pretoria! Our plane stopped in Francistown where we went through passport control. The Botswana immigration officer was unhappy that I had an open visa instead of the usual 30-day visitor's permit. I received my visa on September 9 from the Botswana Embassy in Washington, D.C. According to the immigration man, my visa had expired a month after that day, leaving me with no permission to enter Botswana. The last thing I wanted to hear was that I could not enter this country. For the past seven months, I had tried to go on this journey and the South African government would not give my parents travel documents. I had not seen them for five-and-half years and to have a typographical error spoil this trip was the cruelest irony. Besides, the South African agents in the U.S. had tried to stop me from going by following me around in Washington when I went looking for visas and shouting at me from their unmarked cars, "Have a safe trip..."

Before the immigration official could decide whether to allow me in or send me back, he started asking me questions. Among them was the one about who I worked for. I carried an itinerary that had my name and work address.

"So you work for the Africa Fund?" he said, looking closely at the schedule.

"Yes," I replied, not sure whether that was a good or bad thing to admit. After all, the transit cards we were given when we got off the plane belonged to South African Airways, although we had flown on Botswana Airways. My level of paranoia was increasing fast, and I was not sure whether I would end up in New York or Pretoria. I began imagining the South Africans hiding behind the bushes waiting to take me to Pretoria. Couldn't they at least wait until after I had seen my parents, I kept thinking. My fears suddenly froze when this stern official broke into a wry smile and said: "Africa Fund, that is the same as the American Committee on Africa, right?"

I wanted to answer that it was not quite so, but this was no time to be smart. I could sense the ice breaking around me and I had to react soon.

"Yes, it's the same thing," I replied.

"How is George Houser?" asked the official. My experience, criss-crossing the U.S. on speaking tours, was that whenever a person asked about George Houser, it means they knew something good about us, even though they might disagree with it.

"George Houser is retired now," I said.



"Oh, man," said the official, waving his hand in a manner to express disbelief. "George will never retire, man."

That's probably true, but I just smiled.

"I'll tell you what," he continued. "On Monday morning, you must go to the immigration office and they will cancel this expired visa and give you a visitor's visa."

Inside Botswana, I found that people knew about ACOA. An official of the African American Labor Center was not too thrilled about our ACOA Perspectives on Black Labor Unions in South Africa written by Sandy Boyer. However, the names that were frequently mentioned were Gail Hovey and Jennifer Davis. Gail was remembered from a recent interview she had on the Voice of America in which she discussed the Namibia pamphlet that she had just produced. The interview was broadcast as part of Dateline Africa, which is very well listened to there. Jennifer was heard over the UN radio.

The reason these interviews were remembered is that there is a very strong anti-Reagan feeling in Botswana. It is so strong that members of the U.S. diplomatic corps have very limited social contact with Botswana citizens, and none whatsoever with black South Africans living there.

Peace Corps volunteers told me that ordinary villagers were asking them why the U.S. government was so adamant and unfair in asking that Angola expel Cuban troops while it continued to support the invading South Africans in Namibia. They interpreted this as an attempt by Reagan to embarrass the Africans while at the same time being unwilling to do anything that would upset the racist white South Africans.

At a party in Gaborone, an ambassador from one of the major European countries complained bitterly that the Americans had introduced the issue of the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola and gave the South Africans one more reason to stay in Namibia. Everybody I talked to agreed that South Africa was not about to leave Namibia, even if the Cubans were to leave tomorrow.

I met a U.S. journalist who had just come back from Namibia where he had interviewed the South African military. He was told that there would be no settlement for a long time, if ever. And to prove how serious the military was, they showed him the new roads and buildings that were being built. In fact, the South Africans were bringing in former Rhodesian Army soldiers known as Selous Scouts and integrating them with the South West Africa police force. According to the agreement which has been worked out in the long negotiations of the past five years, only the South African troops will leave Namibia and the South West Africa police will be integrated into the new Namibia police force SWAPO will create. By bringing in these former Rhodesians, South Africa wants to make sure that its agents will be part of the new government of Namibia.

There was also a strong and general feeling that the South African government was a two-headed monster. The South African Foreign Affairs Department was talking about how South Africa is changing while the military was increasing its program of destabilizing the whole of Southern Africa. For example, I was in Gaborone two days after the South African military invaded Lesotho. On the day of the invasion, the South African

Foreign Affairs team was on its way back from a meeting with members of the Angolan government in Cape Verde. It was also the same day that South Africa, through its agents in Mozambique, had blown up fuel tanks in Beira from which Zimbabwe received its supplies. And one day after the Lesotho invasion, the Botswana military shot down a South African Defense Force plane in their air space, near their northern border. Five days later, South Africa announced that it was not exactly a military plane but "a civilian aircraft piloted by a man who is a friend of the Defense Force." And the next day, the South African Foreign Affairs Department met with the Mozambique Foreign Affairs Department at a border post near Komatipoort to talk about "matters of peace and stability." That very night, South African TV, the white channel--there's a black one, too--broadcast a special about "terrorism by the ANC," which claimed that even the Western countries were beginning to believe the ANC "terroristic propaganda" and were criticizing "defense actions like the operation in Lesotho."

By the time I arrived in Harare, this beautiful city was grinding to a halt because of the lack of gasoline. Yet, the people were walking tall, talking proudly of the freedom they fought for. They quickly admitted to their many problems, some internal like the split between the ruling party, ZANU and ZAPU. And, at the same time, they wanted to know what Americans thought about their problems. They have not forgotten the support they received from American people. They are just embarrassed that their growing pains have become so obvious for everyone to see. But they are keeping at it. Or as the popular slogan seen widely here says: "WE ARE REBUILDING..."