

THE NAMIBIAN DILEMMA
Factors Preventing a Settlement

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The End of Optimism

The course of the SWA/Namibian issue has once again reached a turning point. There have been many such stages before in the meandering course of the Territory towards independence; hopes for a settlement have been raised, dashed and raised again many times. But now, it seems, there has been a decisive turn away from a settlement, and it is unlikely that internationally recognised independence will soon be achieved. It is now more likely than ever that the negotiations with the Western Five, on the basis of Security Council Resolution 435 of September, 1978, will collapse. The Western States will no doubt retain an interest in the issue, because of their membership of the U.N., as well as their links with South Africa and also with Black Africa, but they are probably reaching the limit of their willingness to devote concentrated attention to this particular issue.

Such a collapse will be a setback for the West and for the United States in particular. The credibility of these States in Africa will be negatively affected, and this will make it more difficult for them to act as middle-men on this and other issues in the future. It will also be a setback for South Africa (although the Government no doubt will not recognise it now as such). Most important, it will be a tragedy for the people of Namibia itself. In the future there is little doubt that this will be seen as one of the greatest lost opportunities along the road to independence. The Rhodesian road was strewn with lost opportunities; SWA/Namibia seems destined to follow the same sort of road which must in the end inevitably lead to independence, but under even more difficult conditions.

This is a gloomy scenario, although some may see advantages for South Africa in what they will view as justifiable defiance of a hostile world on this issue (or, as it is more often presented officially, as effective resistance against the Marxist onslaught).

How does this scenario arise, when until recently there was considerable optimism being expressed internationally -

especially among the Western Five and at the United Nations? Even Dr. Henry Kissinger, recently visiting South Africa, expressed guarded optimism about the outcome of the current negotiations, based on hopes that the Angolan Government would soon agree to a withdrawal of Cuban forces from that country and thus meet the "condition" imposed by the South African Government, apparently with American encouragement, for South African agreement to implementation of the settlement plan. This optimism has been misleading for at least two general underlying reasons :

- (a) The Americans and others have apparently been trying to "talk up" the situation. Optimism was considered important to maintain momentum in the negotiations and thus keep all parties involved or "on sides". This was part of the British tactics in the final Zimbabwe negotiations in 1979/80, and no doubt there was an attempt to repeat those successful tactics in the Namibian case.
- (b) International aspects of the issue were being emphasised, without due regard being paid to the influence of domestic factors. It is often a weakness in the assessment of international issues that the close inter-relationship between domestic and international factors is neglected. Thus, while the importance of the degree of agreement so far achieved between South Africa and the Frontline States on the independence plan was rightly stressed, as well as the importance of the apparent progress towards achieving Cuban withdrawal from Angola, the implications of internal developments in Angola, in Namibia and also in South Africa, were not adequately taken into account. It is a general rule that the international factors of an issue such as this do not have their own autonomy, and cannot be neatly separated from internal factors. They all influence each other and have to be considered together.

What then are the significant factors currently standing in the way of a settlement? Four such factors - each of which has both domestic and international aspects, closely intertwined - can be mentioned.

1) Cubans in Angola

This was not originally an issue when the Western Five proposals were agreed to in Resolution 435 of 1978, although the presence of Cubans in Angola has always been a matter of concern to the South African Government and to the Americans. It was specifically raised in relation to the Namibian negotiations when the new Reagan Administration began its initiatives in 1981 to get the negotiations going again. It appears (although there is no documentary proof of this) that the Americans gave some form of assurance to the South African Government about negotiating a Cuban withdrawal from Angola, in parallel with the Namibian negotiations, and that they used this "understanding" as a means of getting the South Africans "back on track" in the latter negotiating process.

The removal of the Cubans from Angola is, of course, in the interests of both the American and South African Governments, mainly for domestic political reasons. The perceived threat posed by the Cuban forces, backed by the Russians, is felt very strongly among Whites in South Africa, and the removal of the Cubans would be seen as a considerable victory which might help to balance the "loss" of Namibia to SWAPO. In fact, there is doubt among analysts as to whether the Cubans (even with their Russian support) really pose a serious security threat to South Africa, or even Namibia, but the perception of a threat, which is constantly cultivated by Government spokesmen, is what matters in this case.

Until the past few months this question was dealt with very quietly and there was little public reference to it; it was not linked directly or publicly to the Namibian negotiations. But negotiations between the Americans and the Angolans were proceeding in parallel with the Namibian talks, and it was realistically recognised that some satisfactory agreement on

the Cubans would have to be achieved more or less simultaneously with a Namibian settlement. However, it was important for success that agreement on neither issue should be made conditional on the achievement of agreement first on the other issue. The South African Government did not make its agreement on the Namibian plan conditional on Cuban withdrawal from Angola - at least not publicly. For instance, on 17 September, 1981 - three years after the adoption of Security Council Resolution 435 - Foreign Minister Pik Botha stated in Parliament in regard to SWA/Namibia (during the discussion of his budget vote) :

"In relation to the Cuban presence in Angola, although not directly linked to this matter - I do not wish to be misunderstood here - and although we do not insist that Cuban withdrawal should be a precondition for further negotiations, the fact of the matter is that in practice their presence in such large numbers does increase the political stress and contributes towards a feeling of insecurity, raising the fears and suspicions in that region. This again makes it so much more difficult to make progress in persuading the parties to come to an agreement."¹

The United States Government also made it clear that there was no question of conditions being imposed, one way or the other, and this position has been maintained. For instance, in May, 1981, Secretary of State Alexander Haig said, after a meeting with Foreign Minister Pik Botha in Washington on 14 May, that there was an "empirical interrelationship between the situation in Namibia and neighbouring Angola, which houses SWAPO bases and has some 20 000 Cuban troops on its territory."² At the same time it was stated that the United States was not imposing any "Angolan Precondition" on a Namibian settlement, although the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola would clearly facilitate progress on the Namibian front.

¹ See Southern Africa Record, nos. 25 & 26 (combined issue), December 1981, pp. 11, 12. Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs.

² See Southern Africa Record, no. 24, August 1981, p.50. Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs.

In an interview on 12 February, 1982, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Dr. Chester Crocker, stated :

"We have said from the outset of this Administration that, in our view, the two questions are very closely interrelated, and that movement on one would make a decisive contribution to movement on the other. We've never changed our view on that. Nor have we ever said that one side must go first. That would not be a workable proposition. If we said that South Africans must leave Namibia first - that's not going to work. If we said the Cubans must leave Angola first - that's not going to work. We're seeking to provide a basis and a framework within which both these questions can be addressed in parallel.

The word "precondition", I think, has been misunderstood. You don't get very far in diplomacy by laying down public preconditions to anybody."³

Very recently Mrs. Jean Kirkpatrick, American Ambassador to the United Nations, has referred to the "de facto or existential relevance" between these two issues. At the same time she said that the U.S. Government had "never postulated linkage" between them; the two issues were being negotiated "on parallel tracks."⁴

However, in spite of the apparent understanding that the issue of Cuban withdrawal should not be linked publicly (whatever private undertakings there may have been between Washington and Pretoria) to the Namibian issue as a precondition, there was a change in the South African position by mid-1982. By June the South African Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister were stating explicitly that there could be no solution to the South West African issue until Cuban troops were withdrawn from Angola. At a press conference at Oshivello in Owambo in SWA/Namibia on 16 June, the Prime Minister repeatedly emphasised that the third phase of the settlement plan could not be accepted unless Cuban troops withdrew from Angola.

³ See Southern Africa Record, no. 27, June 1982, p.46. Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs.

⁴ Statement in New York on 23 Sept. 1982, as broadcast by S.A. Broadcasting Corporation in programme Radio Today on 24 Sept.

In answer to a question as to whether he was speaking of a jointly arranged withdrawal of Cuban and South African troops, Mr. Botha said : "No, no. The Cubans must withdraw and the South African troops will gradually be reduced."⁵ Then, very recently, in his speech at the Transvaal Congress of the National Party in Pretoria on September 13, 1982, Prime Minister Botha said that the Government was ready to go over to the implementation of the settlement plan, "but the Cuban presence in Angola is the obstacle". He continued that it was the conviction of the South African Government and of most leaders of South West Africa that there could be no talk of a free and fair election "as long as the Cubans are a direct threat in South West Africa". He said further, in a stronger statement on this point than has been made before :

"The South African Government has adopted a reasonable attitude as regards the provisions of a settlement plan and has taken the lead in getting the negotiations completed, but the South African Government is not now and will not in the future be willing to implement any settlement plan in respect of South West Africa, unless a clear agreement is reached beforehand, in terms of which the Cuban forces must withdraw from Angola. If this position of the South African Government brings us into conflict with the United Nations and generally with the international community, then we accept the consequences of such conflict. If others like it or not, the Republic of South Africa is a leading state of Southern Africa and it has interests in its neighbourhood just like other states. South Africa maintains that forces of foreign countries must not be concentrated in Southern Africa. Apart from our position on the effect of the Cuban presence in Angola on a free and just election in South West Africa, it is also our position that the presence of Cuban troops in any country of Southern Africa constitutes a threat to the interests of this country, and I wish to state clearly tonight that we will not and cannot tolerate it."⁶

For their part, the Frontline States and SWAPO have - not surprisingly - rejected the link between the Namibian negotiations and the Cubans in Angola and have refused to accept Cuban withdrawal as a condition for a Namibian settlement.

⁵ Report in Die Transvaler (Johannesburg), 18 June 1982.

⁶ Translated from Afrikaans text of speech as issued by the Press and Liaison Services of the Prime Minister's Department, Pretoria

But it is noteworthy that the Frontline States have not rejected the idea of Cuban withdrawal as such, and it does seem that Angola is still interested in an arrangement on the Cuban issue, in order to derive the benefits of a closer relationship with the United States and the West generally. That is the main incentive for the Angolans, and they probably would not be averse to such an arrangement being timed to contribute to a Namibian settlement. However, the American efforts to reach agreement on the Cubans, which until recently seemed to be making good progress, have now become stalled. Because of the public airing of this matter and the demands being made by South Africans, apart from the real question of survival without the Cubans, national prestige and the pride of the Angolan MPLA Government have now become involved. An agreement on this issue will therefore be much more difficult, if not impossible, for the Americans to achieve.

Adopting a hard-line position, similar to that now adopted by the South African Government, the Angolan Foreign Minister, Mr. Paulo Jorge, said recently that Angola refused to agree to the "demand" by South Africa and the United States that the Cuban troops be withdrawn at the same time that South Africa pulls out its forces. Namibian independence and Cuban withdrawal were separate issues and demands to link them represented interference in Angola's internal affairs. Washington's position on the Cubans, Mr. Jorge added, was "obsessed and paranoid". He concluded that there was now little chance of an early settlement of the Namibian issue.⁷

This Cuban factor, which has thus become more complicated, is of course closely related to another factor involving both Angola and South Africa, namely the position of the Unita movement.

2) Unita

There is no doubt in the minds of informed observers that there is close co-operation between the South African Government

⁷ Report in The Star (Johannesburg), 23 Sept. 1982.

and Unita in Angola, and obviously the South African Government's interests would be served by a new political dispensation in that country, in which Unita and its leader, Dr. Savimbi, had at least a share in the central government.

From an objective viewpoint it can reasonably and fairly be argued that the international community should insist on free and fair elections also in Angola, where there never have been elections. There is sufficient evidence to indicate that Dr. Savimbi and Unita enjoy considerable public support, even if a proper assessment of the extent of that support is not possible, in view of the confusing propaganda from both sides. However, realistically one has to recognise that there will not be internationally supervised elections to test the strength of Unita versus that of the MPLA, and there is nothing South Africa can legitimately do about that. Angola is an independent state (recognised as such even by South Africa), and South Africa has no international legal right to insist on elections or on a change in the political system in Angola - for the same reasons that the South African Government denies the right of other countries to intervene to bring about political change within South Africa and claims an exclusive right in that regard itself. (The South African Government cannot - and does not - claim the same sovereign right in South West Africa/Namibia which is acknowledged as having an international character.)

So, even though equity and justice would seem to demand that what is good for Namibia is also good for Angola, international law and political realities do not provide for the implementation of this principle.

If the Cubans should withdraw, what will happen to the MPLA Government? Will Unita pose a serious threat? Will South Africa withdraw support from Unita, or will South Africa rather encourage Unita to overthrow the MPLA and take over in Luanda? The South African Government is widely believed to be heavily committed to Unita which in turn has apparently been

of assistance against SWAPO. So it is distinctly possible that South Africa will insist that Unita's position in Angola be secured before any final South African withdrawal from Namibia.

If the present Angolan Government were stronger, if it were not dependent on the Cuban forces, if Unita were not a serious threat and if the economy were developing well, then it would be much easier for that Government to reach an agreement with South Africa. Unfortunately, the Angolan Government is too weak to be able to bargain effectively.

Unita is therefore a factor for both the Angolans and the South Africans and it is another serious obstacle lying behind the obstacle of the Cuban presence.

3) Timing of Agreement

For negotiations to succeed between widely divergent parties (as in the Namibian case), rather than for there to be simply a capitulation of one side to the other, the timing of an agreement has to be right. On the one hand, the point must have been reached where the contending parties each feel that the costs are too high (or at least becoming too onerous) to continue the conflict. On the other hand, each party must feel that it has a reasonable chance of winning power or dominant influence as a result of the agreement - in this case a UN monitored election.

One must ask the question : Are either of these two requirements satisfied at the present time in the Namibian case? Although there has been growing concern in South Africa about the increasing costs of the Namibian war, it cannot be said that the costs are yet too high. Relatively speaking, the material and other costs have not reached the proportions of the costs to the Rhodesian Government of the war there by 1979. In the case of SWAPO, the costs in human losses have been high, and much equipment has been lost in South African raids. But

the organisation still receives replacements of its weapons and it seems to be able to replace its human losses. Further, and most important, as is the case in this type of warfare, SWAPO suffers little if any political cost as the result of military defeat. On the contrary, its international standing and support continues to grow.

In regard to the proposed elections, SWAPO is presumably fairly confident that it would win, but cannot be sure that it would get the two-thirds majority required to have a final say over the independence constitution. On the South African side, there cannot be any real expectation that a non-SWAPO party or group can win an election. The best hope must be that those opposing SWAPO can achieve at least a third of the votes.

This latter point is a major consideration militating against a settlement, because there seems to be a conviction that a SWAPO victory would create an unacceptable security risk to South Africa and, probably more important, an unacceptable domestic political risk to the Government. With this perception of the SWAPO danger, and with the strong likelihood that SWAPO would win a UN monitored election, how can the Government agree to a settlement? This brings us to the next related and very topical factor.

4) State of Internal Politics in SWA/Namibia

The past few years, since the internal election of December 1978, have seen a gradual disintegration of the internal political system in the Territory. The political parties, whether ethnically based or otherwise, have seemed unable to move towards effective unity. The DTA was a fairly broad-based alliance, even though its components were all representative of ethnic groups rather than of national movements, but the lapse of time has brought major defections from the alliance. Although many parties and groups are opposed to SWAPO, personal and ideological rivalries have kept them apart,

and effective and credible national leaders, offering an alternative to SWAPO, have not arisen. National unity thus remains a distant dream.

The basic problem has been the structure of the governmental system imposed by the South African Government through the Administrator General in proclamation AG 8. While there is a central government, there are also second tier governments for the various ethnic groups, which retain considerable power. Some of these second tier governments are inefficient and reportedly corrupt, and the White Government in particular has opposed the elimination of apartheid measures in the Territory. The central government, presently run by the DTA, has been frustrated by its inability to deal effectively with the second tier ethnic governments.

Now there is currently the extraordinary spectacle of the South African Government disowning its own creature - which the DTA originally was - and trying to put together a new ethnic combination to replace the DTA. The Government also appears to be trying to unseat and discredit the DTA's leader, Mr. Dirk Mudge, who has not been willing enough to toe the Pretoria line. These latest efforts to form a new "interim government" in Windhoek really amount to a case of trying to shift the deckchairs around into a new pattern on the deck of the "Titanic" - while disaster looms ahead.

In fact, the DTA has not been able to govern effectively - and has therefore lost support - because the South African Government has hobbled it, denied it what it needs, allowed the second tier governments (especially the White government) to retain powers, e.g. in the education fields and over local government, which keep basic aspects of apartheid alive and well in the Territory. Now the South African Government plans to turn the clock back and to try again to form a new anti-SWAPO front, by giving even more authority and prestige to representatives of ethnic, second tier governments. These efforts

will fail, because of the contradictory policies of the components, and may even contribute to a bigger SWAPO victory, if and when an internationally supervised election takes place. Another possibility is that, paradoxically, the DTA may now gain in strength, after cutting its ties with the South African Government, and achieve the support from the population that it was never able to achieve when it appeared to be South African backed.

It would probably be better for the credibility of the South African Government in the Territory, if it were to maintain openly its right, as administering power, to decide on the form of interim government and on the terms for independence, rather than constantly to claim that it is allowing the people to determine their form of government and political future. The appearance now is clearly one of trying to manipulate the political groupings from Pretoria, through the office of the Administrator General. The question is also being asked : Is one of the aims of the new scheme developed in Pretoria to bring the National Party of SWA back into the fold (to give it a share of power once again over the Territory and support from the Pretoria Government) and thus satisfy some of the right-wing back-lash in South Africa? If so, we see again the influence of South African domestic political factors on what is considered to be an international question.

As already indicated, the internal political situation in Angola is also very confused and unstable. The Government there does not have a secure political base and has a civil war on its hands, requiring the presence of foreign troops. Thus the situation in both countries, Namibia and Angola, which are most directly involved in this conflict, is deteriorating. Neither has strong, unified central authorities to exercise political will.

Concluding Comments

These four considerations, very briefly analysed, lead unfortunately to a pessimistic view of the chances of an international settlement in the foreseeable future, in spite

of circumstances currently being propitious - such as the American attitude and the strong desire of Frontline States (particularly Angola and Zambia) for an end to the conflict in their own interests. Further, there are undoubtedly benefits to be gained from a settlement, especially for South Africa. These include improved relations with the West, especially the United States; a more relaxed relationship with our neighbour states; a reduced defence commitment of both money and men; and an ending of an international dispute which has created growing problems for South Africa over about thirty-seven years. But for the time being the view of many in South African political and military circles seems to be that these potential benefits are outweighed by the political and security risks, as they perceive them, of a settlement.

In the meantime, the economic situation in the Territory continues to deteriorate. The effects of the drought and the low international prices for the major export commodities have caused enough problems on their own. But the fragile economy of Namibia suffers most of all at present from a lack of confidence caused by the deepening uncertainty about the future of the country.

For the South African Government there is no easy escape from the Namibian dilemma; the risks are great whatever it does. It cannot realistically be sanguine about future relations with Namibia under a SWAPO government which would be linked to other hostile neighbour governments - although SWAPO's power to challenge South Africa would in fact be severely limited. Further, a SWAPO political victory would be seen within South Africa as a defeat for the Government, both by conservative Whites and by Blacks, at a time when it is already struggling against right-wing reaction to limited domestic reform proposals.

Although partly created by the Government's own rhetoric about SWAPO and exaggerated perceptions of the Communist threat, these problems are real ones. But what is the alternative? Are the risks of not settling any less, e.g. an escalating and widening conflict (with its attendant moral and

material costs), greater foreign (especially Soviet and Cuban) involvement in the region, deteriorating economic and political conditions in the Territory, worsening relations with the West and a divisive effect within South Africa itself? And then in the longer run will South Africa not in any case eventually be forced out of Namibia by international pressure or internal disruption, or both, in much more difficult and unpleasant circumstances?

Of course, it takes more than one party to reach an agreement, and there are several involved in the Namibian dispute, including the Soviet Union, with its disruptive influence, and a rather intransigent SWAPO which may well see its advantage best served by playing for time. But the South African Government is still in control of the Territory, and its decisions are undoubtedly the most crucial. It can make or break a settlement more effectively than any other party. This is a heavy responsibility, and history is not a tolerant judge of governments, however well-meaning, which misjudge the situation, miscalculate the course of events and thus miss their opportunities.