THE GENEVA TALKS ON RHODESIA

(Starting November 22, for a period of three weeks, I served as a member of a small, international, Quaker team in Geneva which tried to express its concern for justice for all of the people of Rhodesia. Because newspaper coverage has seemed to me to be inadequate, I've written this strictly personal view of how I see the talks, now adjourned for the season's holidays. LT, 17 December 1976)

With considerable reluctance I rearranged my work and personal affairs to respond to the request to serve as a member of the Quaker team at Geneva. The newspapers had given me the impression that the talks were about to break off, and I envisioned a great deal of personal inconvenience, wasted energy and wasted dollars by my arrival in Geneva to say goodbye to my many friends among the delegates. As I changed planes in London I purchased a copy of the Times (Nov. 22) with the main headline something to the effect that the UK would probably call off the talks.

This feeling of near collapse of the talks was obviously bolstered by my personal analysis that Black Rhodesians and White Rhodesians were too far apart in their objectives to negotiate a settlement. Reporters suffered from the same problem. Colin Legum, an internationally know reporter on African affairs, had predicted that the talks wouldn't last five days.

In spite of all these predictions of collapse, when I arrived in Geneva the talks had already been going on for better than three weeks, although without much progress to show for it, and none of the delegates were discussing breaking off the talks. In fact, many were giving me high probability figures for some kind of settlement. One significant factor in keeping the talks going is that none of the five delegations present, nor the British Government, nor Ivor Richard (the chairman) want to go away with the blame for breaking off the talks. One of the "iffy" questions floating around was what the chairman or the other delegates would do if one or another of the delegations pulled out. It was an irrelevant question, for nobody was about to leave.

The so-called "front line states", those countries bordering Rhodesia, plus Tanzania, all are vitally interested in seeing an orderly transition and all had official observers at the conference, as did the British Commonwealth, quietly, but persistently, keeping their viewpoints known.

Of course, nobody has a bigger stake in an orderly transition than the blacks and whites who hope to live in the new Zimbabwe under majority rule. The Geneva talks are generally seen as the last opportunity for an orderly transition. The pressure is heavy for settlement. Disruption of the talks will not come accidentally, through disagreement on minor issues, or because of prima donna behavior on the part of the participation.

The first four weeks of the talks centered on a single agenda item, a guaranteed date for independence under majority rule. The question was insisted on by African nationalists, particularly the Patriotic Front (Nkomo & Mugabe delegations), as the first order of business.

A lot of misleading press coverage came out of Geneva which tended to give the date issue an image of nit-picking. The guaranteed date is actually of great importance, both as a matter of substance and psychologically. Failure to understand the date issue is failure to see the talks from the context of the long and
frustrating African nationalist struggle in Rhodesia. Some actual constitutions and numerous projected constitutions for Rhodesia purported to reach majority rule at some indefinite time in the future. The African feeling was that these constitutions were unreliable with elastic dates for majority rule that were always stretching out for some other time. Both the Rhodesian Front and the British Government went into the Geneva talks with an "elastic" date for independence and majority rule, i.e., majority rule after all of the constitutional processes have been completed. The Rhodesian Front was clear that if the constitutional processes were not completed the current Rhodesian parliament would come back into power. The British viewpoint about the results of a breakdown or inordinate delay in new constitutional processes was not articulated.

A guaranteed date for the turnover of power gave the African nationalists something they had never achieved in previous negotiations and immediately lessened the importance of possible disagreements on issues of structure for the interim government. The agreed upon latest possible date is March 1, 1978, with options left open for discussion of a somewhat earlier date at the end of the talks or an earlier date through earlier completion of the constitutional processes yet to be negotiated.

With the date out of the way, activity at the talks became much more intensive as the delegations turned to the problem of the structure of the interim government. Meetings became continuous with working sessions of joint meetings for the delegations with the chairman, meetings of individual delegations with the chairman, and delegations meeting with just their own members before and after these sessions to plan the next round and analyze the last round.

News stories began to appear with headings such as, "Talks Deadlock on Structure", when no efforts were even being made to work out differences. A number of days were consumed as projected structures were presented by the African delegations, questions asked, and explanations made. Public statements from the Rhodesian Front delegation indicated total disagreement with the structures suggested by the Africans, but this was prior to any Rhodesian Front presentation of their own scheme. The conference adjourned December 14 without a stark confrontation of black-white differences on structure or the tough negotiating needed for moving closer together.

During this process of presentation and clarification of plans for the structure of the interim government, the African delegations came into agreement on major points, so that it became clear that structure was not to be a point of African division.

There is African agreement on three major issues:

1. A unitary body should be created, a council of ministers or something of that sort, with both legislative and executive powers. This council to be made up of 25 persons, five to be named by each of the delegations at Geneva. This arrangement avoids the sticky question of the relative size of the constituencies of the various delegations. It also eliminates racial representation.

2. Within the council of ministers the Rhodesian Front is not to have the portfolios of Justice (the police) or Defense (the armed forces). The allocation of these portfolios to whites is a presumed feature of the so-called Kissinger plan
which Ian Smith wishes to implement. There is uneasiness about even assigning these portfolios to individual Rhodesian Africans. Alternatives being discussed within the talks or around the edges of the talks include some sort of collective leadership of a presidium nature with a rotating chairmanship or giving these portfolios to a third party such as the UK, the Commonwealth, or to UN peace keeping forces.

3. A British presence "with teeth" is seen as necessary within the interim government structure. This is not yet clearly defined, but it is seen as part of the plan to make it impossible for dissidents of any color to disrupt or take over the government. Although not as clearly articulated as a goal, this British presence also provides a mechanism for turnover of power which avoids recognition of the Smith government as a legitimate body now holding power. In the eleven years since the Unilateral Declaration of Independence by Rhodesian officials, no government has recognized Rhodesia, and Rhodesian Africans, as well as the British Government, consider the Smith government to be illegitimate. Nevertheless, as a de facto power they must now deal with Smith in the Geneva talks, but every effort will be made to give the Smith government as little semblance of legitimacy as possible.

If the structure of the interim government is agreed upon by all parties, there is a serious difference among the African delegations as to who should be the prime minister of the council of ministers or how that person should be selected. Although that question is not yet on the agenda, the Muzorewa delegation has already suggested an early election for the selection. Other delegations have not accepted that idea. This is a major issue for the talks, and probably the last one on the agenda.

The obvious wide difference between the Africans and the Rhodesian Front on the structure of the interim government is the immediate hurdle. The Rhodesian Front hoped for racial parity and structure which would allow either race to block policies they considered undesirable. The Africans are promoting government which does not make racial allocations. Ivor Richard will be working with the delegations on the problems of structure before the conference reconvenes, perhaps on January 17 or perhaps later, perhaps in Geneva or perhaps elsewhere. (All of the delegations were unhappy with the unusually high costs and the bad weather of Geneva).

Ian Smith has made tremendous change in his public statements about moving on to majority rule. It is essential, however, that every effort be made to keep the pressure on Smith and the Rhodesian Front to make the further concessions needed to reach a settlement. For those of us in the United States, this means that we must lean heavily on our officials in Washington to keep the pressure on Smith and on South Africa. South African policies have more influence on Smith than the policies of any other country. It still seems to be Smith's hope that if he can appear to be reasonable but stymied by unreasonable African nationalists that South Africa, and perhaps the United States, will step in and protect him and white privilègé.

The Geneva talks, which they are probably going to continue to be called even if they reconvene in Timbuktu, are going to take some more time, perhaps a lot of time. I hope the onlookers can be at least as patient as the participants. The time already consumed has had fringe benefits. Delegations are spending a lot of time meeting together in formal sessions. There are many accidental and some
planned meetings across delegation lines which would not occur within short time spans. Political objectives are being redefined, clarified and commonality of interest arrived at across delegation lines in a way which did not exist prior to Geneva. There is some coming and going among the delegates. As many as 150 different African nationalists may have participated already, with as many as 125 in Geneva at any one time. An esprit de corps among those who spent the winter of 76 in Geneva is being developed. Hopefully, this will carry through as Geneva decisions are implemented, and those who made them so painfully have a vested interest in their success.

There has been much speculation and a good deal of confusion about the political role and political relevance of the Zimbabwe guerrilla forces in respect to the Geneva talks and a possible Geneva settlement. Nobody seems certain who speaks for these forces, either at Geneva or elsewhere, or what kind of political problems they have among themselves. A small group of these men came to Geneva while I was there. This group was given some advance press billing as being a sixth delegation coming to the talks. In the event, they came to town quietly and joined the Mugabe delegation. Within the delegations they talk about possible use of the guerrilla troops within the armed forces of Zimbabwe. There is no expectation that some kind of a settlement might be reached in Geneva which would be so abhorrent to the guerrilla forces that they would attempt to destroy it by continuing warfare. Guerrilla activity is totally dependent on the cooperation of the front line states for camps and for shipment of arms and other supplies. The front line states are at Geneva and will be in agreement with a settlement, should one be reached, which means they would end guerrilla activity from their territory if any such activity should be contemplated. A settlement at Geneva will end the support of the guerrilla role, and if there are dissidents among the guerrillas they will move into the political scene in civilian roles under the political leadership of their choice.

At one time there was speculation that the guerrillas might become a strong political force to replace the old-line nationalist leaders. That hasn't happened. It might yet happen if the talks fail, but as of now it seems that the guerrillas are adequately represented at Geneva.

The talks in Geneva are an effort to transfer power at the conference table. The transfer sought is not tokenism but a major shift with persons now excluded from power taking over the majority responsibility for operation of the government. Change, some of it superficial and some revolutionary, would result at every level of society. Symbolic of total change will be the renaming of the country as Zimbabwe. Transfer of such tremendous power by negotiation is rare. The delegates to Geneva think it may happen there. Let us hope they are right, and every person in Rhodesia will then emerge a winner.

Lyle Tatum