

The Cry of the Churches in Namibia

by
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After his arrest, Peter was put in jail where he was handed over to be guarded by soldiers. But the people of the church were praying earnestly to God for him. He was tied with chains, and there were guards on duty. Suddenly an angel of the Lord stood there and a light shone in the cell. The angel shook Peter by the shoulder, woke him up and said: "Hurry, get up!" At once the chains fell off Peter's hands." Acts 12:4-10.

I am very happy to be with you today. It is a long way from the occupied land of Namibia to St. Peter, Minnesota. I am very happy to be here, to see so many old friends, to meet so many new friends, and, of course, to see so many of the young people who are from my country and are studying in your country. I thank all of you, especially the people who put so much effort into planning this conference. Thanks must also be given to the President and staff of Gustavus Adolphus College and to all those who have given funds so that we Namibians could come from so many places to be with you.

My journey has been much longer than just the miles between Namibia and Minnesota. As you are starting to learn, Namibia is a land far different from your own. You live in a country where freedom is written into the law. Your nation is rich, and the wealth is spread about to many, if not all, of your people. You are free to speak, to work, to move about, to worship God

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without interference. You elect your own leaders. Yes, you have had difficulties. People of minority heritage have been treated badly. But based on the truth of God's Word, you are fighting that evil. All in all, you have much to thank God for.

But my journey has been from a different place. I live in an occupied country. Like Peter, the Namibians are in prison, and the prison is our own country. We are held hostage by the only nation on earth to use race as a criterion for the definition of justice.

Our people are in chains

I stand before you, a bishop of a people in chains, the chains of racism and oppression.

We have been in chains for more than 100 years. First, the Germans came, killed our people and took away much of our land. Then, during World War I, the South Africans came and took away the rest. We were made a trust territory. We were to be protected as a sacred trust of civilization. But, the administrator was the Union of South Africa, and they took away our mineral wealth and appropriated our people. Instead of a sacred trust, we became the forced laborers to the system they call apartheid.

In 1966, the United Nations took a careful look at our situation, and saw that we had been

enslaved. They revoked the mandate, and told South Africa to leave. In 1971, the International Court of Justice confirmed that, under international law, South Africa had to leave. They did not leave. They have not left.

Let me tell you what it means to be ruled by Pretoria. It means we are divided up according to what they call tribes and ethnic groups. They do not divide themselves up into Afrikaner, English or other White tribes. But we are divided, with 94% of Namibia's people broken up into homeland governments, Bantu education, Bantu health facilities, separate development.

We are the slaves. They are the **baas**. We do the work, but the riches go into different pockets. The ratio of White to Black wages is 18 to 1. The government spends the equivalent of \$700 per year on the education of each White child and the equivalent of \$100 on each Black child. The South Africans have taken 77% of the good land for the White farmers, while half of the population is confined to 5% of the viable farm land in the North. But this is not enough suffering for us.

To keep us in this prison, the South Africans use their army, their security police, their appointed interim government. They kill, rape, torture and imprison my people without trial. They call us communist terrorists. They kill the brave young people who are fighting for our freedom.

I remind you, under international law, South Africa is illegally occupying Namibia. They remain by force, by brutality, through their violence to my people.

Namibia churches speak out

Now you might have begun to think, this man talking to us is talking politics. May I be very clear to you. I am not a politician. I stand before you today as a leader of the largest church in Namibia, the Lutheran Church. But I come to you with the full support of the Anglican, Roman Catholic and AME Churches. Altogether we are more than 70% of Namibia's people, active Christians who believe that human rights, human dignity, freedom from unjust laws and police, and speaking out for the poor and oppressed people....that this is an integral part of God's plan for humankind.

The South Africans say we are dangerous, we are opinion makers. We Christians do not preach their gospel. Their gospel is to obey the government of racism. Christ's gospel is that in Jesus Christ there are no slaves, that all are

equal in his sight, and that he has come to set the captive free, both from sin and from imprisonment.

So the churches, which are the only democratically controlled institutions in the country, speak on behalf of the people. We are together against injustice, rejecting both occupier and his appointed government. When our children are tortured by the army, like the young boy whose face was held near the exhaust pipe of

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an army truck, we speak out. When they rape our women, we speak out. When they detain our pastors, our evangelists, our people, we speak out. When government destroys justice, the church speaks out, and will always speak out. If we do not, then we are unfaithful.

The church runs hospitals to give the people loving care. Our hospitals serve more outpatients than any government hospital because the people know that they will be treated with dignity at our clinics. Just two weeks ago a farmer and his wife were admitted to Nandjokwe Lutheran Hospital with serious injuries. They had been beaten up by White South African soldiers. They were in their fields when the South African soldiers came. They wanted to know where the freedom fighters were. But Mr. Shindjala Nghaamwa and his wife Victoria did not know. Mr. Nghaamwa was taken away from his wife and brought to a place of water. His head was held under the water for many minutes. Then he was beaten with clubs and kicked with army boots until unconscious. He was brought back to his wife. She was beaten and kicked. They even shot the chickens. Mr. Nghaamwa has lost some fingers; Mrs. Nghaamwa has a broken right arm. These were the soldiers of so-called Western democracy, defending our people against communism. Let me tell you, when this happens, the churches speak out.

Let us talk about communism. The South Africans tell you they are defending against communism. Are you so naive to believe that? Communism is not our problem. Who are the freedom fighters? The members of SWAPO are the children of our mothers, our sisters and

brothers. They are full members of our churches, baptised Christians. The liberation movement is not our problem. The South African army and its government in Namibia, that is our problem, the obstacle to peace.

U.S. policy must change

We must, unfortunately, talk about the United States' role in our continued occupation. It is uncomfortable to hear, but, as St. Paul said to the Ephesians, we must speak the truth in a spirit of love. I am speaking in that spirit.

In 1976, the United Nations wanted to impose sanctions on South Africa because it refused to leave Namibia. The United States said: "No, wait, we will negotiate a settlement. We will bring Namibia to independence." Along with four other Western countries, the United States drew up a plan, now known as United Nations Security Council Resolution 435. This was 1978. SWAPO agreed to the plan. Even South Africa agreed but refused to implement it.

In 1981 the Reagan administration, as part of constructive engagement, told South Africa it did not have to implement the plan until Cuban troops left Angola, 600 miles away. South Africa, of course, thought this was a wonderful precondition, and it remains to this day. We, as churches, rejected this linkage of our just independence with the internal affairs of a sovereign country.

Meanwhile, South African troops were occupying the southern part of Angola, and were supplying weapons and air cover to UNITA, the guerrilla movement in Angola. Then last year your government decided to assist South Africa's ally, UNITA, directly. UNITA and South Africa fight side by side, killing Namibians and Angolans.

It should be clear to you that your government does not want us to have our independence. It has placed an irrelevant precondition in the way of UN 435; then it has provided arms to UNITA, which makes it impossible for even the irrelevant precondition to be fulfilled. This is clear to Namibian people. The United States is supporting South Africa's foreign policy. The United States is supporting the killing of my people.

Last fall I was in a meeting with one of your State Department officials. These are the people who have read some books about my country, so they are the world's experts on Namibia. He told me that it was unrealistic for us to expect that the United States would take an active part in our struggle for independence. He told me that

Southern Africa was too far away for American troops to get involved.

Well, I found this very interesting. First of all, we have never asked that America send troops to liberate us. But, for the sake of argument, I asked him: If Africa is too far away to send aid to help us, how is it that Africa is not too far away to send arms and stinger missiles to those who are killing us? If Africa is too far away to help us, then why is it not too far away to worry about the Cubans? And I ask you tonight: If your government says Africa is too far away to assist us, then has your government stopped giving military intelligence to the South African army about Namibia and Angola?

Namibia is too far away for the participation of the United States in our independence. But, Namibia is not too far away for America to take an active part in our destruction. Is this the new American concept of justice and freedom?

We must touch again on this question of communism. It is well known that SWAPO, the Namibian Liberation Movement, receives aid from the Eastern countries. It should also be known that SWAPO receives aid from many Western countries. SWAPO is the people of Namibia, most of them Christians. SWAPO has churches in their refugee camps. The churches send chaplains to preach to the people in exile. Many SWAPO freedom fighters have been baptised and

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confirmed in the military camps. Even you have chaplains in your own army. Does this sound like communism?

I also find it interesting that the American government is concerned that one day, in the future, Namibia might possibly be oppressed by communism. These people are worried about the future, how touching. Why is it then, that these same people are not concerned about the real oppression, the killing, the torture, the rapes,

the imprisonment that is happening this very night. Our oppressors are with us now, not in the future.

The churches in Namibia are united together in a call for peace. A just peace as written and approved by the United Nations in Resolution 435. We call upon you to shout to Washington, to your senators, to your congressmen, stop this aid to South Africa and UNITA. Remove this irrelevant linkage of Cubans in Angola! Stop vetoing the call for strong sanctions against South Africa.

I have said many times: We need strong action, not weak games. We need a short, sharp shock so that there will be freedom tomorrow, not the slow squeeze that means freedom in 20 years.

Churches work together

There are many in America who have been working with us for our freedom. We are especially grateful to our Christian brothers and sisters who have been praying and working on our

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behalf. I know that if it were not for their love and concern even the name of my country might not be known here.

We are also grateful to the churches for their aid to our work, both inside Namibia and among the Namibians in exile. Of their own free will, without our even asking, the churches and the church colleges are now giving scholarships each year for Namibian students to study in the United States. The churches have sent aid to the refugee camps, supported us inside Namibia with teachers, helped us rebuild our printing press when the army destroyed it and helped us in the past with our hospital.

In the time that exists before our independence, we will ask you for more such help. But it is very important that your aid be channeled through the churches, and not into agencies working with South Africa's appointed government. We do not need any money or aid that will be used to support the status quo. There is no such thing in our country as "neutral aid."

The churches believe that the Lord of history is still working to establish justice. There is no "balanced view" of our suffering. Aid to Namibia must be aid for our future, not band aids that

keep the South Africans in power.

We therefore ask that the granting of scholarships to train our people will continue so that we will have competent people to govern our country. There are many needs, development needs that can be met through the work of the Council of Churches. I would be glad to speak to anyone about aid programs.

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I trust I have made it clear to you why I am speaking such strong words. It may be hard for you to understand our suffering. If you were to come to Namibia, to the North, you would soon feel the pain that my people suffer. I have tried to inform you about our situation.

The Church in Namibia is following the call of Christ. The Church is strengthening its members so that they can have a faith strong enough and a courage bold enough to stand for justice and human rights. The Church is a mediator, standing on the side of the oppressed people and also pointing out, warning the oppressors. It might surprise you to know that each Sunday we pray for those in power, we pray to God as great decisions concerning our country are being made by the nations. We ask God to help those who are responsible to use their power according to God's will and righteousness.

It is the responsibility of the Church to serve not only our members but the community, to condemn sin and defend truth and peace. We do not exist as Christ's Church to obey unjust laws but only to obey God's Word and Christian conviction.

May I say to you in deep humility, we are ready to pay the cost for our obedience to Christ, whatever that may be.

We are like Peter, in chains. The people of Namibia, the churches of Namibia, cry out for a just peace. May your nation return to its noble ideals of supporting our just independence. We are crying; no, we are dying. The work of peace, the work of justice, is honorable work. It is work favored by God our Creator. I have spoken the truth to you in a spirit of love. Pray with us, work with us. May God grant us peace. Thank you.

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