Editorial

In 1984, the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia, Kleopas Dumeni, said that "the re-election of Ronald Reagan is the re-election of our suffering."

These were harsh words, indeed, from the head of Namibia's largest church, but it was not always so. In 1978, Dumeni, along with so many of Namibia's Christians, welcomed the involvement of the United States in negotiations to bring about the independence of their country from South African apartheid rule. They had grown weary of the "pass laws" and detentions, disillusioned and bitter about the brutality of the police and the squalid education being offered their children because they were black. Namibians rejoiced in 1978 because the leader of the free world, the United States, was taking an interest in their plight.

But for Bishop Dumeni and his people it has been a terrible journey from the hope of the past to the despair of today. After six years of the Reagan administration's "constructive engagement" policy of friendly persuasion toward South Africa, Namibia is worse off than ever before. The brutality of the South African army and police has increased tenfold, shrouded in Pretoria's ban on travel in the northern third of the country. Last June, South Africa appointed an unpopular and undemocratic interim government in the territory, and there is no hope for genuine independence.

Bishop Dumeni has seen his people killed by South African soldiers in Namibia. He has held the hands of the dying, comforted their widows and orphans. He, along with hundreds of thousands of Christians in the north, has faced death squarely each day. He still awaits the day when the colonial army will leave, and his people can choose their own leaders and affect their own destinies. And he prays for our help.

For even at a time when most Americans understand that South Africa's white government is anti-democratic and repressive, the United States government is acting as if South Africa's colonial occupation

Arson Destroys Church Offices in Namibia

The main offices of the Council of Churches in Namibia were destroyed by fire on the morning of January 23. Fire officials reported that the blaze had been deliberately started.

In an official statement issued that afternoon, Dr. Abisai Shejavali, General Secretary of the council, said the act was "nothing else than sabotage."

"As it is the task of the church of Christ to pray for her enemies," said Dr. Shejavali, "so we as Christians continue to pray for those who did this act of arson."

The council, which represents all the major church bodies in Namibia, has long been an active opponent of South Africa's continued occupation of the territory (formerly known as South West Africa). According to Dr. Shejavali, police and fire officials said that the fire had been started with gasoline and kerosene in four places around the council building.

Dr. Shejavali reported that neighbors heard a loud noise at about 3 A.M., saw the flash of the fire, and noticed unknown persons leaving the scene in a car.

The fire severely damaged the council's development, finance, nonformal education, and reception offices. According to council staff, the smell of petrol was still evident later that morning in files in the reception room at the front of the building.

The fire department arrived at the scene soon after the blaze was discovered, and was able to get the fire under control before the entire building was consumed. Police sealed off the area and did not permit church officials to enter the premises until 11 A.M.

When asked about the fire, Dr. Shejavali said, "You know we are living in a difficult situation, and when you are speaking the truth of the Gospel, you meet many problems."

The council's statement pledged that "the Council of Churches in Namibia and its staff will continue to strive for true freedom and independence of this country, and by no means be tempted or be discouraged by such a wanton deed."
For Namibians, A Year of Suffering

South Africa's decision last year to declare populous northern Namibia off-limits to church officials, human rights monitors and journalists (see "The Imprisoned Nation," Dateline: Namibia #1, 1985) has succeeded in obscuring abuses of Namibian civilians by South Africa's army and police force. But the picture that emerges from eyewitness and church reports of South African behavior in their occupied colony is one of systematic brutality and violence against Namibians by the white authorities.

And although a full accounting of South African atrocities in Namibia may never be given, the fragmentary reports reaching the West confirm that 1985 was a year of suffering and oppression for the Namibian people.

It was a year of sorrow for the family of Mrs. Vilhelmina Shalimba Wakalondwa, who was burned alive last April by South African soldiers at her home in Onambashu village in northern Namibia. According to eyewitnesses, the elderly Mrs. Wakalondwa, who is blind and infirm, was unable to flee her tiny home before South Africa's troops searching for SWAPO guerrillas set it ablaze.

A few weeks later, on May 11, a 36-year-old mother of nine, Mrs. Maria Kambangula, was assaulted by both black and white South African troops in her village at Onankali. Mrs. Kambangula, a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, suffered a broken shoulder and other injuries during the ordeal.

A different sort of horror was visited on the children of Oshikuku Secondary School, a Catholic mission school near a South African army base. On the first day of the new term, April 9, the badly decomposed bodies of between four and eight Namibian men killed by South Africa's dreaded paramilitary force, Koevoet ("Crowbar") were discovered in a ditch near the school. The bodies were found only after the stench of decomposition reached the school grounds. Koevoet commander Brigadier Hans Dreyer later admitted his troops were responsible for the deaths, describing the victims as "terrorists"—Pretoria's term for Namibians who have taken up arms to resist South Africa's illegal occupation of their country. Dozens of people visited the gravesite in a vain effort to identify the remains, in hopes of finally locating missing loved ones. Because the South African army has virtually unlimited powers in Namibia, the stories of Namibians found dead at South African hands are common.

One of the cases documented by the church occurred on July 5, in the village of Etale in the northern war zone. On that day, South African soldiers approached the home of Mrs. Olivia Katatu, a mother of several young children, including a three-month-old infant. The heavily camouflaged troops trained their weapons on Mrs. Katatu, who was grinding corn in the yard of her home, and opened fire—striking her in the head and killing her instantly.

Less fortunate was Mr. Franz Uapota, a 48-year-old father of five who was slowly kicked and beaten to death by white South African soldiers on November 30 near his home in Embo. No reason for the deadly assault has been offered by the authorities.

Adding to the terror of daily life in Namibia is the widespread use of detention without trial by the South African authorities. Under such repressive laws as AG 9 of the South African legal code, the colonial government is empowered to seize anyone for any reason and hold them in secret prisons for unlimited periods of time without recourse to the courts, attorneys or even medical care. Hundreds of Namibians are detained each year under such laws, to be held for days, weeks, or even months at the whim of the army or police, and subject to the very real risk of torture.

Mr. Nahas Ndevahoma, a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Namibia and principal of Osheka Junior Secondary School at Kongo in Ovamboland, experienced both the capriciousness and the brutality of South African rule when he was arrested at his home on July 29.

Mr. Ndevahoma's troubles with the authorities began on July 10, after a shipment of food for the school failed to arrive and a second order arrived incomplete. Because the school is located in that part of the country declared a "security zone" by the South African government, Ndevahoma had arranged for the occupation army to deliver the supplies, and it was to the local army commander that Mr. Ndevahoma went to register a complaint about the apparent theft. But the incident was never investigated. Instead, Ndevahoma was accused of aiding SWAPO guerrillas, and, following his arrest, was sadistically tortured.

"I was continuously beaten, three sacks were tied around my neck covering my head, water was poured over me, some forced into my nostrils and some through my mouth," he said. "While this was being done I was kicked in the stomach."

But in a country entering its eighth decade under South African governance, Nahas Ndevahoma's experience is a common one. Each year countless black Namibians are beaten, tortured, jailed and even killed by Pretoria's army and police. Indeed, in the face of universal resistance from the people, South Africa has come to rely on the systematic use of violence and fear to enforce its illegal writ.

The burden of oppression has fallen with particular harshness on the churches,
whose order of the day. So desperate had the violation of human rights still was. Bishop Dumeni told the delegates, “suffering . . .”

Geneva, Switzerland. “In Namibia,” Dumeni said, “the security situation in the northern war zone, said Dumeni, that the Lutheran Medical Mission’s child immunization program was no longer able to operate, and the church was no longer able to perform its evangelical role. “We are no longer free to conduct church-related meetings at any time and anywhere.”

A Namibian mother and child.

Persons Held in Detention in Namibia as of November 1985

Festus Abel; Johannes Akambaye, municipal employee; Mr. Amakali, teacher; Nathaniel Amkugo, mechanic; Helmut Angula; Nestor Asohongo; Martin Akunude, builder; Thomas Akunda, mechanical engineer; Immanuel Anders; Petrus Haimbodzi; Oscar Haludilu, accountant; Fillemor Hamukoto; Frank Hamunime, contractor; Immanuel Hambenwa, teacher; Franz Hango, teacher; Frans Ihuhwa, interpreter; Johannes Iipito; Agapitus Iiyambo, teacher; Eric Ikukutu; Amunyena Iipenge; Stephanus Ishilelo; Agapitus Iiyambo; Joseph Jabala; Johannes Jeremia; Eliakim Johannes, teacher; Kleopas Johannes, teacher; David Jonas; Rev. Junias Kaapanda; Jona Kambudu, postal worker; Johannes Kandima, businessman; Toivo Kankono; Lamek Kavila; Reinhold Kwathiinde; Absalom Linus, teacher; Henok Malakia; Festus Myula, government clerk; Gerhard Nafuka, miner; Modestus Nambwandja; Wilhard Nehale; Ndeuka Nakatana, bank employee; Benjamin Namke; Reinhard Namke; Andreas Namweya, evangelist; Lusia Nanghama; Johannes Nangolo, builder; Lukas Nauyoma; Kondjeni Nghedhe; Absalom Onesmus; Markus Paulus; Veinela Paulus; Jakob Penduki; Paulus Raphael, filling station attendant; Andreas Shapumba; Teofelus Shidiju; Henok Shifeta; Ferdenand Shifidi, principal; Damian Shikongo; Iyambo Shikongo, teacher; Timitte Shikongo, church elder, shop owner and farmer; Oskar Shikoyeni, bank employee; Heikki Shiliifila, teacher; Paulus Shilongo; John Shiluwa, miner; Petrus Shihapu; Reinhold Shipo; Paulus Shipwaya, teacher; Elikan Shoombie; Johannes Utoni, farmer; Marius Valommbela, teacher; Nduwe Weljoba; Tobias Andimba; Naftali Andimba; Mathewus Gabriel; Andreas Gideon; Mvula Kambembe; Listo Katengo; Petrus Nangombe, teacher; Alfeus Nipamulunda; Frans Angula, laborer; Nobert Ankone, laborer; Desiderius Ankome, teacher; Khashulu Vilibo, teacher; Bernardinus Shikongo, school principal; Elikan Shoombie; Erastus Utoni.
INTERVIEW WITH
MRS. HILJA SHIVUTE

Mrs. Hilja Shivute is an important part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia’s expanding ministry in education and early childhood development. Her husband, Thomas, is a Lutheran pastor and head of Christian education at the ELOC Education Centre at Ongwadiva in the northern war zone. The Shivutes have four daughters.

Q: Can you tell me a little about your work in Namibia?
A: Well, by occupation I am a teacher, but nowadays I am working as the Secretary for Sunday Schools and Kindergartens in the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambokavango Church. I arrange courses and meetings for Sunday school teachers. Sometimes I go around visiting the congregations to listen to the problems of the teachers, to speak about materials, or to attend their meetings. We also have a big meeting, or feast, every year for teachers and children. We invite eight or ten people from every congregation, and in every congregation there may be five or six Sunday schools.

Q: So a congregation is almost like a large parish with many preaching points. What are the ages of the children?
A: We have children from three to fourteen years of age. At fifteen they go to confirmation school.

Q: Where do you get the materials for all these Sunday schools?
A: I have been trained in Finland and many of them I have got from Finland and adapted for our work here.

Q: Do you know how many children are in the Sunday schools all over the north? How many children go to Sunday school?
A: We now have more and more children in our Sunday schools. From last year up to this year attendance has grown by over five thousand.

Q: Let’s talk about Sunday school in a typical place in northern Namibia. When will the children come, how many children will be in each class, how does the class begin?
A: In some congregations the children have Sunday school during the service. They go in the church first and, before the preaching begins, the children go to other places with their teachers. At the end they come back and we close together.

But in many congregations the children go to their Sunday schools in the afternoon—in different places not far from their homes and grouped according to age. It is why we have many Sunday schools. We are trying to use this system whereby we are trying to teach children in different age groups. But because of lack of teachers you can sometimes find one teacher who has fifty children to teach.

By dividing them according to their ages, we can use teaching methods that are good for each age. For example, if we think of the three and four-year-olds, we cannot keep them for too long a time, and we use many different materials to help them understand. In an older group, we can ask them to draw or to tell about, or to give their ideas, as to how they feel. Those who are ten or more can say what they feel or ask what they do not understand.

Q: Do they memorize Bible verses at all?
A: Yes, they do. We are trying every Sunday to let them learn a short sentence from the text we have.

Q: Do the parents go to Sunday school?
A: Yes, and I think it helps a lot, because nearly every time we have family church—where youth, parents and small children are coming together. It is a little bit different than in Europe. I don’t know in your country, but when I have been in Finland, I have seen that children are not at all in church. But for us every Sunday we have family church. The children get used to going to Sunday school and they understand it is their church also.

Q: Now you live at Ongwadiva, which is not far from Oshakati. It’s the major South African military base in the north isn’t it?
A: Well, one of them.

Q: What is it like for the children in the north? What is their life like?
A: Some of them are frightened. They are not so free, not free to play outside. We have to warn them all the time not to touch an unknown thing they come across outside or near the house. As you know, the military is so very heavy here, we can find bombs almost anywhere. Our teaching is that the children should not touch any unknown thing outside on the ground or in the bush.

Q: Are there any stories about children being hurt by bombs?
A: Yes, many. At Ongwadiva, I cannot remember whether it was 1981 or 1982, there was a bomb near the school, and the children were playing with it, handing it to each other. One child hit it against a tree and died on the spot and another was brought to the hospital and died after some days.

Such stories are many in our country, and at every school the children have heard about such kinds of stories. It is not easy to let them go far from their home alone. Another thing is that the children are growing up in fear, and they are not free to speak the truth. They have to be careful to whom they are speaking.

Q: How do you explain that to a child who wants to be friendly? What do you say to a five-year-old?
A: It is not easy.

Q: So part of family education is for everyone to tell the children to be careful?
A: Yes: Even on the radio you can hear it.

Q: On the government radio?
A: Yes, but it is very difficult, because the radio tells people to...
help the army, to report if you see a bomb or something. It tells how much money you get if you bring in the bomb or tell them where you saw it. The children hear this and want to get money. It can place children in such a situation that they will try to pick it up to bring it to the army, not knowing how dangerous it is. And this is going against what the parents are teaching children at home.

Q: What about the life of children in general? You have been through a bad drought. Tell us about the children in Namibia, what is happening to them?

A: Well, this past year I can say it was a little bit better because we had rain, though not the same amount in every place. There are some families in which both mother and father are employed. They can buy enough food for their children and feed them well. But they are a small group. Some parents have difficulty with their large families to keep the children well, to get enough food, to pay for their schooling, or to take care of their health.

Q: What are your main needs in the work that you are doing with the children in Namibia?

A: Nowadays we really have a need for modern kindergartens. As you know, the kindergartens are started and run by the church, but they ought to be the responsibility of the state. In our area, Ovamboland, the Department of Education says they have no money for taking care of kindergartens. The church has seen the need but there is no money. We are trying to do it but we have no materials.

As you know, in kindergartens we have to teach the children by using and playing with many materials. We need somebody who is willing to help us in building even one model kindergarten, because, when we are training our teachers it is difficult to show them how it can be done. We can try to describe the methods, to show them the materials we have in the office, but to show how to do it in practice is not easy. Right now classes are being held under trees—and of materials there is nothing.

Q: When you are teaching, are there any special things that apply in the Namibian war situation?

A: Yes. As we see that the children need somebody who loves them, we speak much about love, about Jesus who loves us. For example, now we have children who haven’t got their fathers at all. Maybe he has been killed, or perhaps he has fled. Many of these children are living in fear, and some of the children have never seen their father. When we are speaking that we are one in Jesus and there is Jesus who loves us all, I think we have to speak very much about love, and about God who is our Father.

Children in Namibia. Through kindergarten and other programs, Namibian Lutherans and their friends overseas are trying to meet the children’s needs.

PRAY AND ADVOCATE FOR JUSTICE IN NAMIBIA

June 16 is World Day of Prayer and Fast against unjust rule in South Africa and Namibia. Your church should be involved in this global Christian witness. The May AIM packet contains a bulletin insert with suggestions for advocacy on this important day.

Work for Namibia’s Future

For many years, South African and Western corporations have profited from the mining and sale of Namibian natural resources. But the beneficiaries of these activities have been Namibia’s colonial occupiers, not the Namibian people. Unless Namibia’s natural resources are protected, the wealth that Namibians will need to build schools, hospitals and houses will be gone, and the country will remain impoverished and dependent.

Colorado Representative Patricia Schroeder recently introduced legislation that would prevent U.S. companies from participating in the theft of Namibia’s precious inheritance. That bill, the Namibia Natural Resources Protection Act (HR 2589), would make it illegal for U.S. companies to mine or market Namibian minerals until after independence. Passage of this bill would send a strong message of support to black Namibians, and put pressure on South Africa to implement the UN plan for free elections.

This bill needs the support of all persons concerned about justice for Namibia. Members of your congregation may wish to contact their representatives in both houses of Congress to support and co-sponsor the Namibia Natural Resources Act. Time is of the essence, since the bill may come before Congress as early as this summer. Actions already taken by the Lutheran Church in America concerning South Africa and Namibia, are in strong accord with the intent of the Schroeder bill (HR 2589). Arrange for a time (perhaps after Sunday services) in which members of your congregation can familiarize themselves with the issues; provide writing materials so that those who wish can write their representatives and urge support for this crucial law.

United States Senate:
The Honorable

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

House of Representatives:
The Honorable

House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515
WHY NAMIBIA CHURCHES WANT SANCTIONS

By Sebulon Ekandjo

The dispute over Namibia has now gone on for almost twenty years. Those twenty years, added to the 82 years of colonialism, make it over one hundred years during which many lives of innocent citizens have been lost, and much of the wealth of the land plundered.

This situation is still continuing and has evoked concern from the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Lutheran World Federation. The church is thus forced to declare its position in favor of sanctions against the South African government. And in this, as with previous matters, the church is a spokesman for the people in this country.

The church does not take its position with a blind eye, without anticipating any new suffering which may accompany the implementation of sanctions. New suffering may befall both the whites and blacks. But the church is convinced that those sufferings are the only alternative to avoid the shedding of blood. Such suffering has a voice that will be heeded and could force the South African government to bring about the necessary changes.

The voice emanating from the muzzle of the gun is not favoured by the church, but the peaceful negotiations that were undertaken in the past were ineffective. Now, only one avenue remains open—to isolate South Africa by all means.

It is clear that the church is not advocating the isolation of South Africa out of hatred, nor out of hatred for the many blacks who have suffered for too long in their country, and who will be suffering more. The church is doing it in good faith, so that all those who have a say in the affairs of this country, through negotiations will give the whole nation the right to choose its desired and true leaders.

BISHOP DUMENI PLEADS FOR THE RESCUE OF THE DYING NAMIBIANS

By Sebulon Ekandjo

During his visit last fall to Finland, Bishop Kleopas Dumeni told newsmen that the most important thing at the moment is to take serious measures in order to bring about a peaceful solution and independence to Namibia. Namibians should be saved from dying.

The Bishop visited Finland as a guest of the Finnish Missionary Society, after attending a meeting of the Lutheran World Federation at the end of August.
South Africa Suspected in Church School Bombing

Bishop Kleopas Dumeni of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELOC) said he suspects that South African soldiers were responsible for a bomb blast at Oshigambo Lutheran High School in northern Namibia on the night of Saturday, January 18.

None of the 213 pupils, ten teachers or other staff were hurt in the explosion, but extensive damage was caused to the school’s electrical system. In a detailed statement to the police, Bishop Dumeni said he “totally rejected” a press statement made by the South West Africa Territorial Force that “SWAPO terrorists” had carried out the sabotage attack. Instead, he stated, “I suspect members of the South African Defense Force at the Oshigambo army base to be responsible for this bomb explosion at the school.”

The explosion happened at 10:15 P.M. in the room housing the school’s generators. The engineer responsible for the generators said he saw two unidentified people in the vicinity of the engine room soon after 10 P.M. The engineer tried to turn off the generators for the night, but was stopped by a loud blast as he approached. The resulting fire was soon out of control and damaged the roof and walls of the generator room, diesel drums, engine oil drums and the wiring system together with the generators. The loss is estimated to be $12,000–$15,000.

Bishop Dumeni said there were some “puzzling questions” concerning events surrounding the explosion. The previous week, a white South African soldier had entered the school premises at night and asked maintenance workers when the generators were turned on and off, but they were unable to tell him. On Friday, January 17, the engineer himself was confronted by soldiers from the Oshigambo army base who asked him the same question. He told them the schedule and reported the matter to the school principal. The following day, the principal went to inspect the engine room and found weapons and other evidence that troops had been there the previous night.

Following the explosion, Bishop Dumeni made further enquiries about the presence of government troops at the school. A South African officer from the Oshigambo base, 2nd Lieutenant M. Mouton, admitted that his soldiers had been on school premises on the night of the 17th and left the arms, explaining they had been informed of a plan to sabotage the generator. But the officer denied that troops had returned to the school on Saturday night—the night of the explosion.

Harare Declaration

In a development of potentially far-reaching significance for southern Africa, justice advocacy in the United States and Canada, a gathering of Christian leaders from around the world has called for the independence of Namibia and the end of South African apartheid “as a matter of urgency.”

Meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe, last December, representatives from the Lutheran World Federation, the All-Africa Conference of Churches, the World Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches heard southern African Christians, including Namibian Lutheran Bishop Kleopas Dumeni and South Africa’s Nobel laureate, Bishop Desmond Tutu, appeal for increased Western pressure on the white minority government of South Africa.

Among the resolutions passed in Harare was a call for the imposition of mandatory, comprehensive economic sanctions against Pretoria and the declaration of June 16, 1986, as a day of prayer and advocacy for the suffering peoples of South Africa and Namibia. In the United States, a national, interdenominational committee which includes the LCA, ALC and AELC, has been formed to coordinate implementation of recommendations that came out of the Zimbabwe meeting.

The Harare Declaration is reprinted below:

We leaders of churches from Western Europe, North America, Australia, South Africa and other parts of Africa, along with representatives of WCC (the World Council of Churches), WARC (the World Alliance of Reformed Churches), LWF (Lutheran World Federation) and AACC (the All Africa Conference of Churches) met here in Harare, Zimbabwe, from the 4th to the 6th of December, 1985, on the invitation of the World Council of Churches.

We have come together to seek God’s guidance at this time of profound crisis in South Africa, and have committed ourselves to a continuing theological reflection on the will of God for the church. We affirm that the moment of truth (kairos) is now, both for South Africa and the world community. We have heard the cries of anguish of the people of South Africa trapped in the oppressive structures of apartheid. In this moment of immense potentiality, we agree that the apartheid structure is against God’s will and is morally indefensible. The government has no credibility. We call for an end to the state of emergency, the release of Nelson Mandela and all political prisoners, the lifting of the ban on all banned movements, and the return of exiles. The transferring of power to the majority of the people, based on universal suffrage is the only lasting solution to the present crisis.

We understand and fully support those in South Africa who are calling for the resignation of the government. We regard this as the most appropriate and least costly process of change and as a contribution towards such a change. As we await a new democratic and representative government in South Africa, then:

1. We call on the church inside and outside South Africa to continue praying for the people of South Africa and to observe June 16th—the tenth anniversary of the Soweto uprising—as a world day of prayer and fasting to end unjust rule in South Africa.

2. We call on the international community to prevent the extension, rolling over, or renewal of bank loans to the South African government, banks, corporations and para-state institutions.

3. We call on the international community to apply immediate and comprehensive sanctions on South Africa.

4. We call on the church inside and outside South Africa to support South African movements working for the liberation of their country.

5. We welcome and support the recent developments within the trade union movement for a united front against apartheid.

6. We demand the immediate implementation of the United Nations Resolution 435 on Namibia.

We, gathered here, commit ourselves to the implementation of the Harare Declaration as a matter of urgency. We are confident that the liberation of South Africa will be liberation for all the people in the country, black and white.

Churches, International Community Reject “Interim Government”

Efforts by Western governments, the Council of Churches in Namibia and the Namibian independence movement SWAPO to negotiate a peaceful end to South Africa’s illegal administration of Namibia suffered a major setback last June when Pretoria inaugurated an “interim government” in the disputed United Nations Trust Territory. The South African move, which amounts to a fundamental and perhaps final rejection of the international blueprint for Namibian independence, Security Council Resolution 435, was denounced by SWAPO, the Namibian churches and the United States, which declared the unilateral action “null and void.”

Like a similar failed maneuver in 1978, the interim government is made up of ethnic political parties and white politicians loyal to Pretoria, grouped together in a formation called the Multi-Party Conference.

Nominally self-governing, the MPC has been given only very limited powers by the colonial authorities. In line with South Africa’s divide-and-rule apartheid principles, each of the tribal parties in the MPC has been delegated responsibility for ethnic schools, housing, and health programs. But in practice such services are simply unavailable, with local government budgets going instead to patronage for South African political supporters and large salaries for MPC officials. Further, the MPC’s constituent parties were appointed by South Africa, not elected by Namibians, and Pretoria’s colonial magistrate, the Administrator General, may overturn any decision of the interim government not to his liking.

Defense and other national affairs remain firmly in South African hands, and the MPC has been barred from repealing the racist laws that protect the privileges and power of Namibia’s 70,000 whites—who enjoy a standard of living far higher than that of their black fellow citizens.

For all of these reasons, the Council of Churches in Namibia, representing a majority of Namibians, responded to the pending establishment of the interim government by noting, “The MPC has no democratic mandate nor support from the Namibian people, hence they cannot speak on behalf of the majority of the people in our country.” The MPC, the council predicted, “will only prolong suffering and bloodshed amongst our people... and delay the political settlement and independence of our country.”

Fulfillment of the council’s grim prophecy came on June 17, 1985, the day of the inauguration of the MPC government, when South African army and police units attacked a peaceful demonstration against the MPC in the black township of Katutura, outside the Namibian capital, Windhoek.

According to an American eyewitness, Gary Nelson, “The crowd was peaceful. It was more of a celebration than a confrontation.” But as 1,500 people assembled for a march from the rally site to the township, South African troops in armored cars surrounded the crowd and, without provocation or warning, attacked with teargas and clubs.

“I saw the Koevoet (a feared counter-insurgency unit of the South African army) getting out of the trucks and throwing their batons at cars and beating the people,” Nelson said. “A young woman was lying on the ground, covering her head with four Koevoet beating her.”

Far from being a government of reconciliation and national harmony, the Multi-Party Conference has served only to heighten divisions between Namibians and tighten South Africa’s oppressive grip on the country. Gary Nelson seemed to capture the truth of the interim government on the day of its birth: “I have seen the program of the celebration in the white part of town; I have seen the program of the celebration in the white part of town; it seems that at the time the beatings were taking place, the official celebration was releasing white doves of peace.”


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