Commission On Independence For Namibia

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SPECIAL COMMISSION WILL MONITOR NAMIBIAN INDEPENDENCE PROCESS

PROMINENT U.S. ATTORNEYS MAKE FIRST INSPECTION TRIP
JUNE 18-26

Commission sponsored by Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights. with over 20 years of legal experience in Namibia

WASHINGTON -- A new Commission on Independence for Namibia, established by prominent attorneys, members of Congress, and former Cabinet members, will monitor the seven-month process of Namibian independence to help ensure "free and fair elections" as South Africa ends its occupation of Africa's last colony.

The first Commission observer team will visit Namibia June 18-26 to assess the first ten weeks of the independence process, which is to lead to elections around November 1 for a constitution-writing assembly. The Commission is backed up by a four-member ground staff based in Windhoek and Oshakati, Namibia.

Although the United Nations has official responsibility for monitoring the election process and certifying its overall fairness, U.N. Resolution 435 provides that South Africa will exercise complete control over every phase of the electoral process -- designing the electoral system, recognizing candidates, printing ballots, staffing the polls, counting the votes, etc.

Chaired by Sen. Paul Simon, Rep. Charles B. Rangel, and Yale Law Professor Burke Marshall, the independent Commission will monitor, critique, and make recommendations regarding proposed electoral laws and procedures, including voting registration, certification of political parties and candidates, freedom to publish and hold rallies, etc.

The first observer team includes Howard University Law Professor Goler T. Butcher, former AID Assistant Administrator for Africa; U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Nathaniel R. Jones, who has monitored South African political trials; John W. Douglas, senior partner at...
Covington & Burling and former Assistant U.S. Attorney General; and Robert H. Kapp, a partner at Hogan & Hartson and chair of the International Human Rights Law Group.

This team will evaluate the first ten weeks of the independence process, during which South Africa was supposed to release all political prisoners and detainees, arrange for the return of all Namibian exiles and refugees (with the assistance of the UNHCR), promulgate the election regulations, end all discriminatory laws, and dismantle all Namibian military forces.

The Commission is sponsored by the Southern Africa Project of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, which has been providing legal and human rights assistance in Namibia and South Africa for over 20 years. The Lawyers' Committee also draws on decades of experience with voting rights cases in the United States.

Gay J. McDougall, director of the Committee's Southern Africa Project, is director of the Commission and will accompany the observer teams, which will make additional visits in August and October/November.

In addition, two Commission staff members are based in Windhoek, the Namibian capital, and two in Oshakati, the main town in the northern Ovamboland area where nearly half of Namibians live and where the South African military has been concentrated in its fight against the SWAPO liberation movement.

"The peace process got off to a disastrous start, with the South African-controlled military killing hundreds of SWAPO soldiers who apparently entered Namibia to give themselves up to the U.N. peacekeeping forces," said Director McDougall. "So far, none of the critical events necessary to defuse the atmosphere of South African intimidation have occurred on time.

"Given South Africa's 23-year illegal occupation of Namibia and imposition of apartheid, we think it's critical to monitor the independence process to ensure free and fair elections and real independence for Africa's last colony," she added.

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