NAMIBIA ELECTION WATCH
Thursday, November 9, 1989

The first two days of voting have been inspiring. During the two days, over 180,000 people voted in Ovamboland alone, almost half of all registered voters in this, the largest electoral district. Thousands gathered at polling sites as early as 5 a.m. Many walked miles, and waited in line for hours in 120 degree heat and a blazing sun; pregnant women with babies on their backs, blind and elderly men and women of 80 and 90 years; people so infirm they had to be carried on the backs of friends and relatives. Sixty percent of the voters are illiterate. For perhaps as many as 40 percent when they mark an X by the name of their chosen party on the ballot it will be the first time they have held a writing instrument in their lives.

An impressive team of multinational U.N. peace-keepers and civil servants are staffing the polls alongside their South African counterparts. The polling sites are sprinkled throughout the vast and sparsely populated land: from shops in populated areas to primary schools, churches and tents in areas so remote they can only be reached by four-wheel drive vehicles or helicopter.

Our overall impressions of the first two days of voting are positive. There were certain problems, however, that we believe have significant impact on the fairness of the process:

1) Until late on the second day of voting 40 percent or more of the votes cast at some polling stations were by tendered ballot. This was due to a misinterpretation of the law by the Administrator General's (AG) people. Staff required all voters without official I.D. cards to cast the tendered ballots.
2) We note with concern the relationship in many, though not all, polling stations between UNTAG and the AG’s election officials which places the former in an apparently secondary and subordinate relationship to the latter. This completely vitiates the concept of UN “supervision and control”. We know that UNTAG officials have yielded to the AG’s election officials even when the latter was clearly wrong, as in the case of the tendered ballots.

We are most concerned about this inverted relationship regarding security. UNTAG civilian police frequently seem to be inattentive to the actions and attitudes of their SWAPOL counterparts. For example, at a northwest polling site, a SWAPOL member was frequently admonishing the voters and warning them not to ask any questions about the voting procedures. His CIVPOL counterpart, meanwhile, was writing a letter home.

3) In many polling stations the instructions given to voters, particularly illiterate voters, were inadequate, and occasionally nonexistent. This raises special concern about the possibility of large numbers of invalidly marked ballots being discovered during the count. Frequently voters were simply handed a ballot and pointed towards the polling booth. In some polling stations there was no UNTAG interpreter or the interpreter was unavailable or uninterested. In such cases voters were instructed, if at all, by the AG’s officials only, without any check by UNTAG as to what the voters were being told.

4) In almost all polling stations the role and the rights of party polling agents were largely illusory. The agents were seldom placed so they could see or hear what was really going on and they were sometimes warned by the residing officer not to speak or interfere in any way. Doubtless, more experienced polling agents would have challenged these restrictions. However, we feel strongly that the UNTAG team leader should have corrected his/her counterpart’s rules, which effectively prevented the agents from carrying out their functions. Personality conflicts between the AG’s representatives and the party agents exacerbated the problem. In only one or two polling stations were party agents regularly consulted on any matter which might be of interest to them.

We are particularly concerned that the pattern of placing polling agents where they are barred from effective participation may be repeated in the counting process.

We have communicated our concerns to the U.N. Special Representative, Martti Ahtisaari.

Gay J. McDougall
Director