

Opening address to the International Seminar on The Role of
Transnational Corporations in Namibia

by Sean MacBride
November 29, 1982

Judge Booth, friends and colleagues, I don't really know why you should give me such a rousing welcome. I was Commissioner for Namibia for three years, and I failed utterly to achieve the liberation of Namibia. So I don't see why I should get any welcome.

I rather feel that instead I should be here to account for my failure to achieve the tasks that were assigned to me.

I am very glad, however, to have the opportunity of working with you again in this International Seminar.

I think that probably we should begin by taking stock as to why we are here, as to why we are interested in Namibia and as to what should be done to secure the liberation of Namibia.

First and foremost, Namibia is one area of the world, not necessarily the only area, in which the most elementary human rights are being denied systematically to the population. These are being denied by foreign-imposed colonial rule. Many of us have had experience in other areas of the world of injustices in different circumstances. But there probably has never been any other case in which the issues involved have been so clearly defined and have been so clearly recognized by the international community -- recognized by the international community at the political level and at the legal level.

I'm not going to trace the details of the history of Namibia. We are all familiar with it. You know that it had been a German colony, that at the end of World War I it was handed over by the then League of Nations as a mandated territory to the United Kingdom of Great Britain, and that Great Britain in turn handed it over to South Africa. You all know that by decisions of the United Nations, time after time, South Africa was called upon to surrender its trusteeship of the territory, because it had failed to bring it to independence. You all know South Africa ignored these requests, ignored the pressure of world public opinion, and finally that the International Court of Justice was called upon to give a declarative opinion as to the right of Namibia to be free and as to the illegality of the South African regime in Namibia.

These elements of the situation are beyond question or discussion. South Africa has ignored every request to surrender its illegal occupation of Namibia, whether the requests came from the supreme political authority or from the international supreme law authority of the United Nations. So, this is a case in which there is no room for argument. The illegality and immorality of this continued South African occupation of Namibia is established beyond question.

MacBride, 2.

In these circumstances how is it that Namibia did not obtain the independence to which it is entitled? This is the real issue we have to deal with. And we have to deal with it in the context of the political and economic interests that have thwarted the U.N. decisions and prevented Namibia from securing independence. We have to examine what pressures can be exerted by the free world and by the United Nations in particular to compel South Africa to relinquish her illegal occupation and possession of Namibia.

I would like tonight to pinpoint some of the initial factors that have been overlooked or not published. In my view, the present policy of the United States, and to a lesser extent of the NATO powers, which formed the so-called "Contact Group," stems from a secret meeting that took place in July of 1976, in a hotel in Zurich. It was a secret meeting. It was held in Zurich under a great veil of secrecy, between the then Prime Minister of South Africa, Dr. Vorster, and General Alexander Haig, who was not then Secretary of State, but was then Commander of NATO forces, and Dr. Henry Kissinger, who was then Secretary of State in the U.S. government.

This meeting, as I said, was held under a great veil of secrecy. The fact that such a meeting took place was at first denied and only came to light because some newspaper men accidentally bumped into the three main participants in the meeting, Dr. Vorster, Dr. Kissinger and Alexander Haig, in the corridors of the hotel where they were meeting. It was first denied such a meeting took place. It was subsequently admitted such a meeting took place, but it was said that no political significance should be attached to the meeting because, in point of fact, the only reason that Alexander Haig and that Dr. Kissinger were there was that both their wives were very friendly with each other and that both were interested in some plants that were in the botanical garden in Zurich. So that is why officially they met--the botanical interests of the wives of Dr. Kissinger and General Haig.

Later, it was agreed that they had discussed other things. However, this is the meeting at which I think the present policy of the United States was decided upon. And if you'll allow me to digress for a moment, once a military establishment or a foreign office establishment formulates a policy and accepts it, it is very difficult to get them to change from it. Governments may come and governments may go, but the policy which has been set by an earlier administration, continues to operate until a decision to reverse that policy is made. And, as far as I can understand, this policy has not been reversed since. True, it has not been admitted that there was such a policy. But even if it had been admitted, no steps were taken to reverse the policy.

So then the problem we have to deal with in the United States is really one that stems from the continuation of a policy that was decided upon and kept secret by the government of the United States through Dr. Kissinger, by NATO, through Alexander Haig, and by Dr. Vorster on behalf of the South African government. The policy as I understand it, decided upon then, was that with the help of the United States the South African authorities would set up a "friendly

MacBride, 3.

Namibian government," a government friendly to South Africa, and that that government would then get the support, economic and military, of the United States. It was even discussed at that time that possibly an army would be recruited, a black army that would be recruited and manned by officers of the United States army. It was felt possibly, Dr. Kissinger or Alexander Haig suggested at the meeting, that American officers, black in color, would be more acceptable in Namibia than South African officers.

And of course the South Africans were quite prepared to go along with that, anything that involved the United States in the setting up of a quisling government in Namibia would be gratefully accepted by the South African government. It would enable them to continue the domination and exploitation of Namibia with an "economy" of South African soldiers and mercenaries. Concurrently, the South African parties would make bases available to the NATO powers, bases both in Namibia itself and also around the Cape in South Africa.

A third limb of the agreement reached then was that an attempt would be made to form a South Atlantic alliance, to which South Africa would be a party with the Argentine and with possibly Chile and some other Latin American states. Originally, as I understand it, the South African government was anxious that the NATO, the existing NATO organization, would be extended to the southern tip of Africa and to include the south ocean. The State Department urged then, and this had some influence with Dr. Kissinger, that probably some of the NATO countries, especially countries such as Holland, Norway, and Denmark, might not go along with any proposal that would extend the territorial boundaries of NATO to southern Africa. So that particular scheme was abandoned and instead the proposal to create a completely new alliance, Southern Atlantic alliance, would be pursued instead. Such a new alliance would, of course, collaborate closely with NATO.

So this is, as I understand it, the broad agreement that was reached then. First of all the setting up of a stooge "quisling" government that would have the appearance of being independent but that would be under the control of Pretoria, the building up of an army that would relieve South Africa, the South African army, of the task of defending South Africa for the Namibian "terrorists" or "communists", as SWAPO was labelled; thirdly, the formation of a South Atlantic Alliance.

Now, of course, I wasn't there. I only have this information in a secondhand indirect way, through leaks which I received at the time and which were published at the time. These were never contradicted. Originally, the first step, the attempt was made to contradict, to say such a meeting never took place. When the correspondent of Le Monde, I think it was, published a photograph of Alexander Haig walking down the corridors of the hotel, then it turned out that a meeting had taken place but that it was only concerned with botanical specimens that interested the wives of Dr. Kissinger and Alexander Haig. So I cannot vouch for the details of the accord reached in Zurich. But I think that the people of the United States

MacBride, 4.

are now entitled to know what agreement was made then and to what extent the agreements made then have continued to be operative and continued to form part of American policy ever since.

Obviously this meeting was an illegal meeting. Obviously, the agreement reached at it was illegal. It was withheld from the Congress of the United States. The Congress of the United States was never told about this, was never told of the agreements that were made then. It does occur to me that it would be of some interest to members of the Congress of the United States that the results of this secret meeting should now be made known. What took place at that meeting and why was this information withheld from the American people? I think it may very well be that those who occupy the seats of power, in the State Department and the White House, to this day have not been given a full account of these meetings, and do not know what agreement was made. I'm prepared to give the present administration the benefit of that doubt. They may be quite unaware of this. But they certainly seem to have been pursuing the policies which seem to result from the decisions taken at this secret meeting in Zurich, Switzerland in 1976.

I would like to draw attention to another factor. The United States, in cooperation with the Contact Group (the Contact Group consists of the United States plus four other NATO countries), has made an issue of the fact that in response to the invitation of the Angolan government Cuban troops have been in Angola to provide defense against South African attacks.

But, in my considered view, the advent of Cuban military forces in Angola became inevitable as a result of the South African policy of attempting to destabilize the government of Angola, to overthrow it and replace it by one of South Africa's choosing. These attempts to invade and to destabilize the government of Angola were made with the full assent and accord of the United States. Now I don't think that the United States ever admitted publicly that it did collaborate in the destabilization and the attempts to overthrow the government of Angola. This is not the way these things are done. But I think that certainly reading from the accounts published by some of the leading members of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) it is quite clear beyond doubt that the CIA collaborated fully in the attempts to destabilize the government of Angola and in the military attacks carried on into Angola by the South African forces. I must pause to point out that there has been systematic undeclared war carried out by South African forces from Namibian territory against Angola, and that these have been intended to try and destabilize the Angolan government. In other words, there has been continual warfare, undeclared war, by the South African forces, against Angola over a period of at least three to four years now.

This is a clear violation of the Charter of the United Nations. These are illegal attacks against the population and the state in Angola, without any legal justification for them. And I have yet to learn of any protests made by the United States in regard to these illegal infringements of international law, infringements of the Charter of the United Nations. There are issues on which United States citizens should take a firm attitude.

MacBride, 5.

I have seen some of the results of some of these illegal murderous attacks. Several hundred people have been massacred, butchered in the course of these attacks. Yet, very little has been published in our press in regards to them. This is an incessant war carried on illegally by the South African forces with the tacit acquiescence, shall we say, of the NATO countries, and the active assistance of the United States. Many of the arms, ammunition and planes used in the attacks are supplied by the United States. Presumably the United States would have the authority and the power to prevent its equipment, its planes, its tanks, its arms to be used illegally by South Africa. But I am not aware of any efforts being made by the United States to dissuade South Africa from the carrying out these murderous attacks on the people of Angola and Namibia.

These are some of the elements which form the background to the issues with which you will have to deal in the course of the next three or four days here. This seminar is concentrating on the role of the transnational companies that operate in Namibia. One must understand that Namibia has been used as a colony by South Africa and that there are no Namibian industries as such. Such industrial developments, mining in particular, that have taken place, are all either owned by South Africa, under control of South Africa, or under the control of multinationals that have their origin either in the United States or in Britain or in Japan. So that the position is that Namibia and the people of Namibia have been exploited very often under slave conditions by multinationals. The multinationals are largely controlled by the U.S., Germany, Canada, Great Britain, Japan and to a certain extent also South Africa.

In the same extent I think I should make reference to the fact that it is also with the help of some of these NATO countries, including the United States, certainly including the Federal Republic of Germany, that South Africa has now been enabled to produce nuclear weapons herself. This has been with the technical and physical assistance by NATO countries. This is a violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, to which these countries are a party.

I'm sorry I've taken so long. I thought it well I should at the beginning of this conference give you an outline of some of the problems facing you.

To my mind the continual denial of freedom in Namibia, the continued violations of the decisions of the International Court of Justice, of the Security Council and the General Assembly, are among the most damaging aspects concerning the credibility of the Western world and are a source of weakness for the United Nations itself. I think nothing has done more damage to the credibility of the free world than the utter cynical behavior of the United States and of the western NATO powers in regard to Namibia.