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## **Yale-UN Oral History Project**

Ismat Steiner  
James Sutterlin, Interviewer  
16 May 1998  
New York, NY

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Ismat Steiner

Interviewed by: James Sutterlin

May 16, 1998

in New York, NY

James Sutterlin (JS): This is a YUN interview with Mr. Ismat Steiner on Namibia done in the United Nations on May 14, 1988. The interviewer is Sutterlin. Mr. Steiner, I want first of all, to thank you for agreeing to participate in this Yale Oral History Project. I would like to talk with you today about your experiences as a UN Staff representative in Namibia. But, in order to do that, I'd like, first of all, to ask you to say something on tape about your background. What were you doing when you were deployed to Namibia, and did you go there as a volunteer? Or were you asked to go there?

Ismat Steiner: Thank you Mr. Sutterlin. My relationship, or connection, to Namibia goes back to the time of 1978, when the original plan was to send UN personnel to oversee the transition into Namibia. As I am sure that you know, that particular effort did not come to fruition, but I had already indicated my interest to be involved and so when nothing happened, we were all very disappointed. We then waited many years until finally, the decision was taken. It was interesting, I originally, many years ago, did work in the Department for Political and Security Council Affairs, and that was sort of my involvement in politics. But, from 1974, I then transferred to the Law of the Sea Department and we were involved in the conference that negotiated the United Nations

Convention on the Law of the Sea. So, although in '78 I had volunteered to go to Namibia, and when nothing happened, I really was working, basically, in the Law of the Sea matters, in legal matters, and did not have too much of a background in the political scene.

Anyhow, when the decision was taken by the Security Council to deploy the first observers, I got a call from a gentleman from Ghana who used to be a director in the Department of Political Affairs, the name escapes me right now, but he called me and asked me whether I was still interested to be involved in the Namibia exercise and I said, "yes, I was." I was then interviewed by Mr. Ahtisaari, Martti Ahtisaari who had already been appointed as Special Representative and Mr. Cedric Thornbury and after our discussions, we all agreed that yes, I would be part of the team.

We then, the original contingent went out to Namibia. I believe it was just before the first of April 1989. Then there was this unfortunate development with the first returnees, from Angola, crossed the border. There was some sort of confusion as to whether they were armed, and there was an escalation in the fighting. The whole thing then was put off for a few weeks. Eventually, I got to Namibia. But, prior to going, Thornbury and Mr. Ahtisaari offered me to be the regional director of the area called Otjiwarongo.

Otjiwarongo is an area of Namibia which is predominantly a cattle ranching area. They have these huge ranches that are mostly all owned by South Africans or white Namibians or for that matter, white Southwest Africans at that time. There was a very... the population was very scattered. Otjiwarongo was probably a city of about, town of about two or three thousand people, tops. There were scattered villages and scattered

farmhouses. Geographically it encompassed a large area because it started from the Botswana border almost all the way to the Atlantic Ocean and I think it was approximately four hundred kilometers wide. It also incorporated the area of Herrera -- land which, under the old apartheid system, was the area reserved for the blacks, the natives, as opposed to the cattle ranches, which was for the whites. So, we got to Windhoek, I remember, I arrived on the 10th of April 1989. We then had a briefing for a few days in Windhoek. We were scrambling, trying to get our supplies; everything was basically done from scratch. We were running around, trying to get transportation, trying to get desks, chairs, you name it. I think in about ten days, I was able to set up my office in Otjiwarongo.



JS: You mentioned the supplies that were in short supply. There have been some indications that because of the urgency that the only source to buy those supplies was in South Africa. Was that the case in Namibia?

IS: Yes. There was no other way. Namibia, what was then Southwest Africa, really, they were totally dependent on South Africa; everything was brought in to it. Under the apartheid regime, Southwest Africa was basically considered like a province of South Africa; it was not considered to be a separate country. As a result, everything was being either being sent from Cape Town or from Johannesburg. Of course, there was some degree of anxiety as to whether the UN should go and purchase, or procure these things in South Africa, but, I believe, really, there was no alternative.

JS: Now, you said there was briefing in Winhock. Was there any training offered, not just to you but to those who would be working with you as field officers?

IS: No, I wouldn't call it training because, as I said, the people who were briefing us were, there were those who had been involved with Mr. Ahtisaari who had visited Namibia over the years and Cedric Thornbury was involved and a few other people. We were, basically, the other people who came to discuss matters were the South African officials themselves, who were representing the Southwest Africa government. We had a few discussions with them, particularly their police force, the Southwest African police, known as SWAPOL, they're the people who briefed us as to exactly the existing political, economic conditions that we were going to find. But, there was very little training, in the pure sense of the word.

JS: And you were regional director, right?

IS: Yes.

JS: And I believe there are ten regions, right?

IS: Yes.

JS: And their, political officers then were assigned to outline regions, outline posts with in the regions, was that the way it was organized?

IS: Yes. For instance, I will give you the example the Otjiwarongo region. We had three centers. We had the regional center headquarters in Otjiwarongo, and we had two district headquarters, one on the east side, which is in Herreraland in an area called Okakarara, where we had one district office having a team of three people there and then, we had one on the west side of the region in an area called Omaruru, on the way to the coast, we also had another district center there. There were two centers plus the regional center that I was heading.

JS: What was the chain of command? Did the regional officers report to you and then you to Windhoek? Or how did that work?

IS: Basically, that is the way it worked. The district heads reported to me as the regional director and we were required to send a weekly reports to Mr. Thornbury, who was director under Mr. Ahtisaari, or for that matter, send in ad hoc reports whenever the need arose.

JS: How did you do that? Were there communication facilities?

IS: Yes, they had set up proximity lines and we were able to fax the mostly encoded messages that we were sending through. We had communications people, we had radios, but that took a bit of time to establish, because, as you said, in the beginning we just scrambling to put the whole thing into shape.

JS: Could you describe what were your functions and how did you interpret your responsibilities there?

IS: Our functions were really to oversee the running of the different administrations. I was literally in a place where I had the authority to question any decision taken by any of the political, for that matter, for instance the police had to work through our Civpol contingent which took time again to assemble. In the beginning we hardly had any civilian police, we had the political contingent that people like myself and the civilian police who came from different parts of the world, different countries, but this as I say took a bit of time. We were there really to try and make sure that the sides that we were dealing with, the Southwest African police, the Southwest African Government were keeping their end of the bargain under resolution 435, and to ensure that the transition leading up to the election was going to be a successful one.

The authority that we had was, as I said, to question anything that we felt was not in keeping with the agreement. We had the authority to raise issues both with the police, with the political administrators. That was our role; to ensure that the transition was going to take place and that the elections were going to take place on the time when the decision had been taken when they should happen.

JS: How did you do this? Did you have daily contact with the local police or with the Southwest African administrative authorities?



IS: Again, going back to the beginning, I don't think that we had a uniform way of, in the ten regions, how we should do it because the situations were quite different in a number of the regions. What I did in Otjiwarongo was immediately establish a kind of committee which comprised of the different political parties, the police and the regional administration, and we used to have weekly meetings in my office, where all of them would basically report what happened during the week. We would keep in touch regularly and then further down, when the election campaign started, of course these activities became more intensive.

IS: And you mentioned that Civpol was a little late getting there. Did you have serious problems with SWAPOL, the Southwest African Police?

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IS: I think there was a degree of reluctance in the beginning on their part. That was quite evident -- the notion that we were going to be there and second guess them, question whatever decision they took. They didn't take that very easily. But, by and large, with the exception of one or two hotheaded fellows, they appeared to be very civil about it. They might not have liked it but they didn't cause too many problems, at least not in my region.

IS: And you brought the political party representatives into this committee that you are talking about? Did you see your role as bringing about greater understanding and communication between the various communities that the political parties represented?

IS: I think that was probably the most important role that all of us played. I mean, there was clearly, very strong feelings among SWAPO on one hand, and the other the DTA party feeling that SWAPO had been involved in the armed resistance while most of the people who were in the DTA, which are the two largest parties, not counting the White party. But, these were the people who were against the armed resistance and the armed struggle. There had been the loss of life, there had been people directly affected by the fighting and they actually had to sit down and talk. It was not easy in the beginning to get these people. You could see the sense of, the high level of...how do I say? They were not enemies at that time, but clearly there were strong feeling towards each other. It was very important to sit down and try and diffuse these situations and explain to them, “look you have no other alternative but to try and work out a solution.” Eventually, that message filtered down.

JS: Were you able to bring the white farmer element together with the other indigenous elements in the society. I mean, were you able to get them to talk to each other or to understand the objectives of the...

IS: Well, again, I think that it was a process that took some time. In the beginning, the white farmers, for instance, there were some who were very radical, who would not, did not accept the idea that they would sit down with the SWAPOL representative, because they considered them “terrorists” or “killers” or whatever. It took a bit of time, again, to convince them. But, I think, what I found to be one of the most interesting things about Namibia was that it didn’t take very long for the people to understand that

there was inevitability about what was happening. They realized that there was no point in resisting it. Once that mindset, that change in attitude took place, it became a lot easier. Again, I am talking about the area in Otjiwarongo; I understand, that there was for instance some of the white farmers in other parts, especially in the South, there was much more stronger, much higher resistance to involvement.

In Otjiwarongo, I would say from what I saw I would say within the first two months, I will tell you a story one time. I am from Tanzania and we speak Swahili and in Swahili there is a word called *wahulu* that means freedom, and they knew that I was from Tanzania, the white farmers. So, they asked me one time, they had a meeting to which they invited me to, and one of them lectured me and said, first of all, you come from a country that was a one party state at that time and who are you to tell us what democracy is, and say, “you should have multiparty elections.” And, I had to say, I am not here representing Tanzania, and I am not here to represent the policy of Tanzania; I am here representing the United Nations. Then he went on to say, “Well, on top of that, what we want, we are not opposed to independence for Namibia, but what we don’t want is *wahulu*.” What he meant was that, he said, “What happened to your own country, what happened to Tanzania, you have had your freedom, now your economy is destroyed. Your infrastructure is no longer there. This is what we don’t want to happen in Namibia. Again, I said, “Look, you are going to be here. You are the people who are to ensure that what you think and say happened in Tanzania and other African countries that you don’t want to repeat that experience. So you must make sure that you are here and now you do what needs to be done to ensure that this country stays the way it is or in fact, develops even further.”

So, I think after a few months, they were quite receptive. I remember one time we had gone to a meeting again in the area where there was the strongest resistance and I don't know if the farmers were probably not aware that I was coming with two of my colleagues: one was a Nigerian policeman, this was from the civilian police and he was the head of the civilian police, and the other thing we haven't talked about was the army. Because the army also came there to oversee the decommissioning of the bombs. There were three battalions in Namibia from three countries. There was the Finnish battalion; there was the Malaysian battalion and the Kenyan battalion. The Kenyans were operating in my area. When we went to this meeting, we showed up, actually with my two colleagues, who happened to be both rather physically impressive gentlemen, very tall and both in their uniform, immediately the farmers said, "Look, we are not going to sit here with black people dressed up in military police uniforms and carrying on." So, they walked out. I mean, that was the attitude in the beginning. Later on the same people were to sit down with these colleagues of mine and share a beer or something. So, that change took place. It took a bit of time but it eventually cleared up.

JS: Was that because of an increasing appreciation of the United Nations? Of the United Nations role? Of the fact the fact that United Nations was not exactly in charge but was really supervising the whole transition process?

IS: Yes, I think the onus was on us as the representatives of the United Nations. Because, when we came there, I think the feeling was that we were there to ensure a SWAPO victory. I mean, after all, there was a resolution passed by the General

Assembly that said that SWAPO was the legitimate representative of the Namibian people. I think many of those who were opposed to SWAPO felt that we were only there, in the beginning, that we were there to ensure the SWAPO was going to win the election and take control of the country. I think the onus was on the United Nations to prove that we were not, that that was not our goal; that we were there only to ensure a smooth transition into a new Namibia. Now whether, the new Namibia was going to be led by SWAPO, or somebody else, was not for us to say. I think we had to get that message across. It took a bit of time; it was easier in some areas and it was less easy in others.

JS: Did you perceive fairly early that SWAPO did have majority support and that its leadership was best known?



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IS: If you want to go back into the elections, I will tell you, in my area, in Otjiwarongo, DTA won the election. SWAPO had less because the situation in Otjiwarongo is that, I would say eighty percent, probably more of the black population were directly employed by the white farmers and their entire life depended on the white farmers. Therefore, they literally did what the white farmers told them to do. At the same time, I think the majority of the people living in Otjiwarongo are Herreros, and traditionally, I really can't vouch for this, but I have always been told that there has been a tribal rivalry between the Ovambos, who were predominantly the supporters of SWAPO, as opposed to the Herreros. Since, the predominant black tribe in the Otjiwarongo region were Herreros, they tended to support the DTA. So, the DTA, in fact, won the election in terms of Otjiwarongo.

JS: That's interesting. Did that, when SWAPO won, what was the reaction?

IS: The election was held over two days. The results were issued over two days. The first day, it was mostly the area that SWAPO was not the predominant party. In fact, at the end of the first day, DTA was in the lead. But, this of course had not accounted for the northern part of Namibia, which is by far, other than the Windhoek central area, which is by far the most populous, and the northern area is ninety, well over ninety percent Ovambo. So when the results on the second day came from the north, then SWAPO completely won by a landslide.

The thing that was interesting, so the DTA and those who were opposed to SWAPO were very happy, almost euphoric on the first day when they were in the lead. There was this huge disappointment and anger when the results came from the north. They suddenly realized that the opportunity was lost.

JS: Did Nujoma personally campaign in your area?

IS: Yes, he came to Otjiwarongo, I think twice or three times. It is interesting enough that the Prime Minister now of Namibia Mr. Geingob was born in Otjiwarongo. I used to know Mr. Geingob when he was representative of SWAPO here in New York, and we became quite friendly. So, when I met him, he actually took me to his mother's house. His mother at that time was still living in Otjiwarongo. So he used too much more often

to Otjiwarongo, but Nujoma came and he conducted a number of rallies in Otjiwarongo in Okakarara and Omaruru, in the different centers, yes.

JS: One of the things that has been noted by others is that the parties did conduct the campaign in a responsible way. Was that your experience?

IS: Well, again, in the beginning when the campaign started, I think people are were excited and a few times things would get out of hand, but you are quite right. One should not minimize the efforts that Mr. Ahtisaari played in this because he used to have regular meetings in the capital with the leaders of the parties at which he kept reiterating again and again, that he was not going to tolerate any kind of misbehavior on the part of the political parties. He really reined them in many many times. Yes, I think by and large the campaign did go quite smoothly.

JS: It was under his leadership that this code of conduct was worked out.

IS: Definitely.

JS: And I think that Mr. Pérez de Cuéllar came there about that time and actually met with the parties together. Did that have a reverberation, so to speak, throughout the country?

IS: Yes, because I think what had happened is, again I give full credit to Mr. Ahtisaari that he did send out the message that he was not going to tolerate any kind of misbehavior on the part of the political parties and that he kept saying to them, “unless you do things in the way that they are supposed to be done, at the end of the day when the elections are held, and I am not satisfied that they were free and fair, that I am not going to certify that and therefore the elections are going to be nullified.” He kept saying that to them, “I am going to hold you responsible.” He was very strong with the position that he took and that he never wavered from that. I think that that convinced the political parties that they really had no other choice but to behave themselves and to do things in accordance with the code of conduct.

Our role, once the code of conduct was agreed upon, was to ensure that it was abided by.

JS: Did Mr. Ahtisaari become a well-known figure? And if so, what was the general impression? I’ve already asked about the United Nations, but in the case of Mr. Ahtisaari, he was something in the way more, he was the head of a big operation there, somewhat controversial, I judge, in some quarters, what did you gain in your region as the impression?

IS: I had no particular problems with Mr. Ahtisaari. On the contrary, he was always accessible to me and at any time that I needed to raise issues with him, he was always available. Yes, I do understand that I think what had happened when certain decisions were taken, I believe that there were some misgivings on the part of certain African



countries that probably Mr. Ahtisaari was probably somewhat too conciliatory towards the South African regime. They felt that, just to be on the safe side, they requested that an African should come and deputize, to be his deputy. That is why Mr. Legwaila, Joseph Legwaila was then appointed as Mr. Ahtisaari's deputy. I think this was merely to convince the African governments that in fact, the process was in fact being conducted and that the results were going to be eventually the right ones. But, I think that politics being politics, they wanted somebody from their side to be there and to ensure that this was done.

JS: What did you see as your main problems that you encountered as a regional director?



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IS: The main problem was basically, as I said, some of the white farmers who were very adamant against the process. They were threatening us many times. I used to get all kinds of nasty phone calls in my office, in my home sometimes. There was an attack on the regional center in Outjo. Outjo is just north, about forty kilometers from where my headquarters were. This was an attack by some white radicals from South Africa. It was that element of the population that gave us the most problems. They clearly showed their resistance. They used all kinds of threatening methods to try and scare us.

I remember one time, interestingly enough, when the representative of SWAPO moved to come and live in Otjiwarongo as the head of the SWAPO team, who is now the Speaker of the Namibian Parliament, Dr. Chitandero, he rented the house next to mine. That did not make my life any easier because I was getting night visitors all the time.

There were these white farmers who used to run night patrol and they used to come and park their vans outside my house and shine bright lights into the windows of my house. Of course, when Dr. Chitandero moved next door to me I told him, I said, “Couldn’t you find another in all of Otjiwarongo except the one beside mine?” You know, they gave us a really hard time. But, they were the biggest problems.

JS: What were these night patrols?

IS: Well, the night patrols, they kept saying that they wanted to ensure that there were no SWAPO terrorists infiltrating into the area. There were all kinds of wild rumors about arms caches being found, and that people were sneaking in with arms at night. Therefore, the white farmers decided to run these patrols. They used to drive around with these jeeps and very bright lights. I think the attitude of the white farmers was one of the biggest problems we had.

JS: These night patrols were done separately from the SWAPOL?

IS: Interestingly enough, when we used to raise this issue with the SWAPOL saying, “look, these people, who are they?” They would pretend that they didn’t know them, and they would say, “Well, it’s probably farmers looking for lost cattle or lost sheep.” They would come up with some rather ingenious explanations as to why these so called patrols were being run. Nobody admitted, nobody would come and say, “We are the people doing it.” But, they were there.

JS: In your region, was there any evidence of Kovoet activities?

IS: There was a small contingent of Kovoet but most of the Kovoet activities were in the north.

JS: It was in the north. So, that was not a problem?

IS: No that was not a problem.

JS: In this operation there were various elements involved. I mean, you had Civpol, you had the military, as you say, you have the UN peacekeepers. I don't know, were there other UN organizations involved, any specialized agencies there? If so, what was the nature of your contact, of your relationship with the other UN bodies and with the segments of the UN operation?

IS: The agencies, most of the agencies came toward the very end of the mission. But, at the very beginning, the only other agency was the High Commission for Refugees, because they came there to ensure that resettlement of the returnees. They had a center, a small office attached to my office. But, again, the Otjiwarongo area was not very much in the forefront where the resettlement exercise took place. Most of the resettlement took place up in the north and of course in the Windhoek area. So, the activities of UNHCR in my region specifically were somewhat minimal.

JS: So the reintegration of the refugees was not really a problem in your area?

IS: Not in terms of numbers. Some did return but the numbers were somewhat smaller compared to the other regions, yes.

JS: What was the expectation? The land was mostly in the possession of the White farmers. Was there a large expectation that that would change after the establishment of Namibia?

IS: I think that, again there was a kind of dichotomy in terms of what the white people felt and what the black people felt. The black people felt yes, that they would get some of the land, and of course, the white people felt that all the land would be taken away and given to the black people. There was that very distance fear among the white farmers. I mean, this is the thing that kept saying, "as soon as the black people took over, all they are going to do is take our land and." Which of course, I went to Namibia last year and after eight years and I actually went back and visited Otjiwarongo. To my surprise, to my pleasant surprise, there had been changes. But, none of these fears that people expected to happen, didn't in fact materialize. A number of the farmers are still there and of course, there is still some kind of, I think it is going to take a very a long time for the attitude in terms of the white versus black to completely die away. But, I think you will find, I asked well, how do you see things now, many of them said, "we are pleased and happy that things worked out as well as they did." So, yes there was that fear and there

was that expectation. Now, among the black population, there may be a certain degree of disappointment because I do believe they did expect to get most of the land at least, and of course that hasn't happened.

JS: What degree of sophistication did you find before the elections among the black population? Were they familiar with the issues? Were they familiar with the personalities? With the concepts that the United Nations stood for?

IS: No, by and large, the people were very ignorant. As I said, most of these people worked for generations on farms. They were, I would say, over ninety percent illiterate. One of the big problems we had was how to actually design the ballot because of the high degree of illiteracy. So, it was very difficult to get the message across to them. We had to rely entirely on interpreters, because none of them spoke English. None of us spoke the indigenous language. Even Afrikaans, which the language that is spoken mostly by the White, not too many of the Blacks could speak Afrikaans. So, we either had to whatever speeches, messages we wanted to convey to them, we had to use interpreters and in many cases, unfortunately, you had a mixed group of people.

Now the Ovambos didn't speak Herrero. The Herreros didn't speak Ovambo and there was a third large group that is the Damara people. The Damara language was completely different from the Herrero. So, every time I used to go out, I used go out with three different interpreters and I would say something and then the Herrero interpreter would speak and then the Ovambo would speak and then the Damara interpreter would

speak. It was not easy getting the message across. Unfortunately, that was the reality of the situation and we had to.

JS: What about the communications that UNTAG setup? There was a radio station, I think. Was that successful given the language problems?

IS: The language, again, there was no other choice but to even on radio, to make announcements in all these languages. There were even more because in the south there were the Nama people who had a different language. So, you had English, you had Afrikaans, you had Herrero, Ovambo, Damara and Nama, about six different languages. That's the only way, if you wanted to get the message out, you had to resort to using all these languages; otherwise you are going to lose a segment of the population.

JS: Tell me about living there. A lot of the UN people who went out to Namibia had not been in the field before, certainly not in a place like Namibia. What kind of conditions did they find in the field? What kind of conditions did you find? What was your daily life like? And beyond that, how did you find that the UN personnel adjusted to the conditions?

IS: Namibia is a unique country. It is physically a very beautiful country. It is mostly semi-desert. It's only up in the north where it runs near the river that you find a lot of greenery. But, most of it is desert. If one can compare it to something in this country, looks very much like Arizona. It has these incredible mountain ranges. So, physically

it's a very beautiful country, very stark beauty. But, interestingly enough, the living conditions in most of the country, especially where the white population was even very comfortable. I mean where I stayed in Otjiwarongo, it was a nice pleasant little town. We had all the amenities, electricity, water, telephone, television, so the conditions were not very difficult.

On the other hand, some of my colleges who served up in the north where there was very little white presence, there was no infrastructure. As a result, the conditions there were very primitive, and those people really, I know many people who had served the entire mission living in a tent with no running water, with no electricity. So, I didn't have to go through that problem but those who did I think they managed as well as they could but there were some areas that were very difficult and there were some areas that were extremely pleasant.

JS: Early in Angola, the conditions were very difficult.

IS: Yes, Angola was difficult. Because Angola is basically what the northern part of Namibia was. It is the same kind of non-development, hardly any development. With the exception of one main road which was built to ensure the military could move up north, there were no roads up there. The moment you left the main road you were stuck in some very deep sand. There was no infrastructure up there at all.

JS: I also wanted to ask about NGOs. Did you have much contact with NGOs within your region?

IS: The NGOs, again, came towards the end of the mission. In the beginning there were not many NGOs, in fact hardly any. But, towards the then end, a month or two before the elections, there was a huge influx of NGOs. They were very excited and they wanted to do their best and help in any way they can. Sometimes, they were a bit too enthusiastic. But by and large, I think they played a good role as long as they kept out of the way and they didn't complicate matters. NGOs did show up towards the end.

JS: Did you find that you or other aspects of the UN operation were able to use the current jargon strengthened the democratic institutions in preparation for independence?

IS: I don't want to be facetious about it. But there were no democratic institutions to strengthen. That's the only problem. I mean, so if one wants to say, we went to establish whatever democratic institutions there are. I think again that if you look at the political parties, and this is why Mr. Ahtisaari really had to put his foot down in terms of the code of conduct, the political parties in the beginning didn't see themselves in the proper, in the specific term of what a political party is. It was almost like the extension of the war. This is how it was, the attitude, the language, the signs, whether physical towards each other were very confrontational. Therefore, one had again to instill in them that "look if you are going to function as a political party, political parties have to behave in a certain way." That message had to be given and finally, the message got across.



JS: And it had worked rather well. How did you explain that? Even Nujoma seems to have changed very substantially from the person he was before the struggle was won and the independence of Namibia achieved? How did you explain that this was so seemingly successful in Namibian society?

IS: I think it would be wrong for anybody to try and come up with one explanation as to why this happened. I think basically what happened was it was a process that had to have all the parties, everybody; the white farmers -- the whites -- who, on one hand, were very resistant and did not like the idea that their power was going to be taken away from them. Then, you had SWAPO that felt that they were the only ones who had the right to control the country. I think there was a certain element in SWAPO that did not wish to share power with anybody else. Then, you had the other predominantly Black political parties that felt that they were going to be dominated by SWAPO, which to them was representative of the Ovambos, who are the largest tribe. They were very suspicious about this whole development.

It was really a process of all these different factors, different factions, to come to the realization that things are not as bad as they seem to be. In fact, they are all striving towards the same end to create a new country that they could all share. That might sound kind of cliché as to how people thought, but I believe that that realization evolved as time went on. As long as that process went, there was less of the friction, less of the confrontation and therefore when the election was in fact held, there were few disturbances.

JS: There was a constitution more or less in place that the United Nations had contributed to, as I understand. So, do you think that was a help also in...

IS: Yes, I think so. They were given something already prepared, something that was already in place and they didn't have to go back....

End of Side 1

JS: I was saying in the pre-electoral period, were you aware of South African influence, of any South African efforts to exercise influence in the region?

IS: Yes, I think there was definitely a connection between the authorities in Pretoria and those in Windhoek. I think they wanted to ensure that the end result, what would be the outcome would be something that they would be willing to accept. Again, Martti Ahtisaari very wisely made a number of trips to Pretoria. I wasn't involved in them directly but he would report to us when he came back, to inform us as to what happened. I think he played the role of trying to ensure the South African authorities that whatever misgivings, or major misgivings they had, in fact, were going to be considered and that they were not going to be completely left on the outside. He gave them the notion that he would listen to their positions and what they had to say and that these would be taken into account. I think this probably is what gave rise to the concerns of the African countries, feeling that Ahtisaari was probably was being too cozy with the South African authorities. I think that the Africans' assumptions were wrong. I don't think that Ahtisaari in any

form or manner was conniving with the South Africans or trying to pacify them to any great degree. But, he also realized that if the South African, the Pretoria regime, would come up totally against what was happening in Namibia, that this was going to create a major obstacle. He had to do whatever he could to see at least that that political problem didn't arise to the degree that it could have.

JS: You mentioned that when you first got there that the person who more or less briefed you was Cedric Thornbury. Did he travel around and visit the regions and maintain that kind of contact or coordination you might say?

IS: Well, he traveled around, but interesting enough, he never came to Otjiwarongo. He was, Cedric was preoccupied mostly with what was happening up in the north. And most of his visits were to the north. Interesting though, because as I said Mr. Ahtisaari came at least twice or possible three times to Otjiwarongo, but Cedric never showed up once in Otjiwarongo. I told him this and he said that, "you are doing such a good job that I don't need to come." I think as I said, he was very preoccupied. Definitely the problem area was the north and he wanted to make sure that he completely on top of that situation.

JS: Now, given your background on the Law of the Sea, you must have been interested, at least, in the fate of Walvis Bay.

IS: Yes.

JS: Was that interest shared by the population? Or were they even aware of the problem of Walvis Bay.

IS: Again, I think we should look at the majority of the African population of Otjiwarongo. I don't think so. To them, it wasn't a problem. I mean, as long as you had a registration card of southwest Africa then you could cross the "border" into Walvis Bay with no problem and a number of them used to have family living in Walvis Bay. So, to them there was no problem. They didn't see the distinction to the difference as to it. Probably the SWAPO and probably the more educated politicians on the other side, realized that in fact when Namibia became independent Walvis Bay was not going to be included in the solution. So, Walvis Bay was definitely a political issue but it didn't have any direct relevance to the people of Otjiwarongo.

JS: I think that that is interesting because actually this would then be another reason why the adjustment to the new independence was relatively easy because they didn't see the fact that Walvis Bay was not included as a terrific loss.

IS: I think so. But, I think probably there was again, it wasn't manifestly or explicitly mentioned. But, I think the feeling was that even if it wasn't included at that time, that it wasn't going to take very long before in fact it was going to be returned or incorporated into Namibia. Therefore, as a result, if that was the expectation then people didn't think it wasn't such a serious issue.

JS: I want to go back just for a moment to Civpol. There had been indication in other places that the Civpol operation is difficult because the makeup of the contingencies was very varied, they come from different societal backgrounds. Did you find that that was true in your region, the Civpol contingents there?

IS: I was...first of all, we had a huge range of countries that were based in Otjiwarongo. I am not sure that I could remember all of them but, we had Nigerians, Egyptians, Singaporeans...

JS: Is this in Civpol or...



IS: This is Civpol, not the military. Singapore, Bangladesh, New Zealand. We had about five or six different nationalities from very dispersed, diverse countries. I was very lucky because the head of the civilian police was a superintendent from Nigeria. I must admit that he was one of the really efficient, competent people I had the pleasure of working with. I think he was able to merge this component of the civilian police into a cohesive unit. They worked very well. Of course their major drawback was that they couldn't function separately from SWAPOL. Wherever they went, they had no powers of independent investigations. I think this is what created probably the major problems for them. They were very much dependent on SWAPOL and because there were elements within SWAPOL that were not willing to cooperate with the civilian police we had quite a few problems in Otjiwarongo.

There was the head, or the deputy, I think... a very difficult policeman from South Africa. I think it was only after the head of the civilian police and myself made representations that this particular individual was creating too many problems that he was transferred out from the area. Then the relationship between our civilian police, the UNTAG civilian police and the SWAPOL, became much better. This also to a great degree was because of the efforts of the superintendent from Nigeria. I think that he was able to, again, I am not convinced, but at least allay some of the suspicions.

The SWAPOL, the southwest African police, took it very hard to have people stand behind them and look at what they were doing. I remember many of them would come and complain, "Look, as a policeman, I should really have the freedom to do what a policeman does and for me to stand here and realize that there is somebody behind me watching my every move." They claimed that it was very difficult for them. There was this attitude and then you had the reluctance of especially among the whites, some of the white police officers, the SWAPOL police officers to cooperate with our civilian. It so happened that the head of our civilian police was a black man, a Nigerian. They didn't take too kindly to that. But, as I said, that eventually when they saw how the civilian police, I believe that we had about six or seven white policemen from New Zealand, and how they were working so well with the African police, I think the message got out. This was something unique. They had never seen this. When they were exposed to such a scene this definitely was able to change the way they perceived things and eventually we were able to work quite well with them.

JS: And language in this case was then not a problem? Most of the civilian police had a common English language.

IS: They all had a common English language. Some were better than others but at least they all could communicate in English. So, that wasn't a problem.

JS: And if the civilian police detected on the part of the SWAPOL some infringement of human rights or something like that, what did you do?

IS: Well, that's exactly what we were supposed to do. This was immediately reported back to Windhoek and the matter was immediately taken up with the Administrator. We didn't have too many of those cases in Otjiwarongo. We probably had two or three that I remember vividly. I think the SWAPOL were intent on testing whether we had the resolve especially between the civilian police and myself whether we were going to tolerate these misbehaviors on their part. And when we showed them from the very beginning that we were not willing to tolerate this, they put an end to it as soon as it started.

But, we really had to get the message across. I was very clear about this to Mr. Ahtisaari and he in turn got the message across to their superiors in Windhoek.

JS: So, when it came time for the actual elections there was no pressure exercised by SWAPOL or other South African authorities on the electorate?

IS: I wouldn't make blanket statement like; I mean probably there might have been efforts, but I think there were minimal efforts. I think that by that time-I keep using the word inevitability because I think this is my perception, I found that the people in Namibia and especially the people in the region that I was in, eventually towards the end, they all said, "look, its is going to happen, we might as well make the best of it." I think that as long as the vast majority of the people had that attitude, it made it a lot easier.

For instance, over the election, I remember the polling places that we had, we had our civilian police the army and the SWAPOL. They all worked well. There was no issue, there was one particular incident where one of the, somebody who was a known SWAPO supporter wanted and that one of the SWAPOL police did something..., but it was immediately it was noted by our civilian police. They immediately took them to task and said, "we are not going to tolerate this kind of behavior. Whether this man is a SWAPO supporter or not, you have no right to try to intimidate him in any formal manner."

Again, I think it was how quickly we were able to react to whatever things they wanted to do. So when we showed them and demonstrated that we were serious about this, they got the message.

JS: How did the military function, the peacekeeping forces?

IS: Well, as I said, we had the contingent we had in Otjiwarongo was part of the Kenyan battalion. But, then we had what was then Yugoslav, a group of them from Yugoslavia and from Hungary, who came there. These were the ones that were



overseeing the shipment of arms back to South Africa. Most of the arms were of course in the north. But, the convoys passed right through Otjiwarongo. This component of the military used to accompany these convoys from one point where they picked them up, and would then go to another point down the road and then hand them over to another point.

They were centered in Otjiwarongo. This was a different component from the military. The military was there again I think for the purpose of demonstrating that the UNTAG was there not only as a political force but were there with the military power and military force to back up our presence. That basically was the role of the Kenyans. They were there as a.... it was not a very large contingent. There were about a hundred and forty men. Of course they didn't come with any heavy equipment. It was mostly semi-automatic rifles and side arms.

But, I think it was a pacifying presence. There were some among the black population, especially among SWAPO supporters, who always felt threatened by the South African military. As long as they felt that they had another military presence, it was more reassuring to them.

JS: In your region were there any camps or cantonment places where the South African troops were kept?

IS: Oh yes. There was large contingent of South African police in Otjiwarongo. In fact...

JS: No, I meant the South African army.

IS: Yes. That is what I am saying. They had a large contingent of South African troops. I believe they had a company of about three hundred men when we first arrived. Of course they were supposed to stay within their barracks. That was part of the understanding. And, they were repatriated back to South Africa. When most of them left, at least when half of them left, that's when the Kenyans came in and occupied the same barracks. On one side you had the South African troops and on the other, we have the Kenyans.

JS: Because the Kenyans were supposed to monitor that they didn't leave the barracks.

IS: That's right.

JS: That was successful? There were no problems?

IS: Well, again, I wouldn't say one hundred percent; but by and large, I think that in the beginning, the South African whether it was the troops, or whether it was the SWAPOL they really tried to test us to see whether in fact we were going to do what we said we were going to do. When they realized that they couldn't get away with any breaking of the rules, let's put it that way, and if they did we took them to task. We

reported it and we were very serious about it. We spoke to them and we didn't deviate from that position.

JS: Last question: What would you say is your most memorable experience as the UN officer in Namibia at a very important time?

IS: Well, it was very gratifying the day when the South African flag was lowered and the Namibian flag was raised. The stadium, we were all there, and it was very very gratifying that we were actually involved in the formation of a new country, of a new nation. That was very gratifying.

There were a number of incidents. I remember one particular one where the representatives of SWAPO and DTA, after a lot of bickering and confrontation in one meeting where they got up and walked to each other and hugged each other. There were a number of people not only the political representatives, and this was something that we had talked about because we wanted to tell the people that "look, whatever fighting, whatever confrontation, armed confrontation, physical confrontation, this was over. This was purely political confrontation. This is who has got the better ideas. This is who is going to be the party to best govern Namibia. And let's forget about using violence and using... if we have any difference it is purely on a political level." It is activities of that kind.

Another incident I found, as I told you, the resistance among the white farmers and then a few months later, they invited us to a "brei," a brei is a very typical South African, white South African affair where they have a lot of grilled meat, and a lot of

drink. And they invited the whole UNTAG contingent and the same summer the farmers were in the beginning not say a word to us. They were there, they were joking and chatting and what have you, I really like the atmosphere. So, when these things happen, as I said, they made us feel that we were achieving something and it made us feel good.

JS: Thank you very much.

IS: Thank you.



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**Yale-UN Oral History Project**

Ismat Steiner

James Sutterlin, Interviewer

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