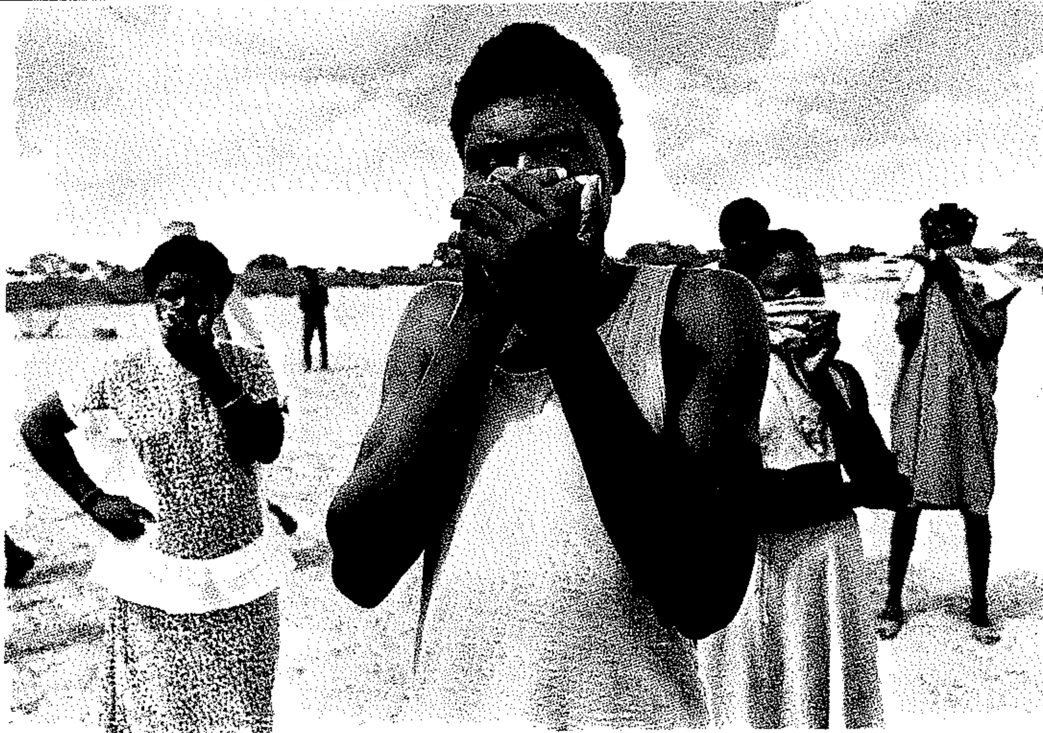

Villagers around an open grave of SWAPO war victims, near Oshakati.

HOT SPOTS

By *Melissa Baumann*

Namibia on Edge

SWAPO and South Africa balance on the same high wire in apartheid's backyard.

ACROSS THE PALM- AND ANTHILL-STUDDED plains of Ovamboland—home to half of Namibia's 1.5 million people—the hold of peace is being tested. The heaviest fighting between the South-West African People's Organization (SWAPO) and the South African security forces took place in this area along Namibia's northern frontier during SWAPO's twenty-three-year war for independence. Now, in Oshakati, an Ovambo town that is little more than a long strip of wooden bars, liquor stores, and hangouts known as *cucas*, men and women dance deep into the night, flaunting SWAPO caps, shirts, and scarves in solidarity—exhibitionism that last year could have gotten them killed. This night they dance in *cucas* with names like Love Station, Mississippi Junction, and Beverly Hills, celebrating the latest airlift of SWAPO exiles arriving at the nearby Ondangwa airport—long used as a landing strip for South African C-130 Hercules troop carriers.

The spirit in Ovamboland is often euphoric as exiles who have been away for as long as twenty-five years return home; but barely contained tensions could ultimately sabotage the peace accord signed last December by South Africa, Angola, and Cuba, the primary proxies in one of Africa's last colonial wars. The U.S.-brokered agreement links the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola to the withdrawal of South African troops from Namibia, and mandates a November 1 election for a new Constituent Assembly. But the election campaign waged across the sprawling open spaces and black shantytowns in one of Africa's least populated and most mineral-rich countries has brought into sharp relief the fierce rivalries that still divide the dominant Ovambo—also the strongest force within SWAPO—from the southern Herero and other tribes. Behind the whole tenuous arrangement still looms South Africa, which seems unlikely to allow a peaceful transition of power that could be a model for other troubled spots in southern Africa—Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa itself.

ON THE TAR ROAD STRETCHING across Ovamboland to the border at Ruacana, South African armored vehicles patrol continuously, guns mounted. Many are operated by former members of Koevoet ("Crowbar"), the ace South African counterinsurgency unit absorbed by the Namibian police (SWAPOL). The force—at last count three hundred whites in charge of three thousand blacks—remains headquartered within Oshakati's "white town," a military compound surrounded by barbed wire. Most of the military families have moved south, deserting their bungalows, hibiscus gardens, and sandbag shelters. But a core of SWAPOL officers—most often dressed in shorts, T-shirts, and thongs—still gathers for a few lagers each evening at the International Guest House, where they toast the fallen empire to German beer-hall tunes.

General Hans Dreyer, mastermind of Koevoet, now SWAPOL chief for the northern region, is one of the men who remained. Dressed in battleship gray, the towering, silver-haired general stands before a map of Ovamboland. The war is over, but he is still hunting SWAPO guerrillas. "Look," he says, "we are trying to locate them, and their arms caches. We have a network of informers. I came up here in '78, and after six months I realized the potential to counter the revolutionary onslaught lies with their own people. There is no better combination than a white man and ten black men to help him."

Human-rights activists receive regular reports of physical harassment and intimidation by SWAPOL. "Detention, murder, rape, beatings, destruction of property have been going on here for twenty years," says Foibe Jacobs of the Human Rights Centre in Ongwediva. "They're still happening. The trouble is that people have to report the crimes to the people committing them—the police." In April, more than two hundred SWAPO guerrillas and civilians were killed during a surprise raid by South African security forces, an attack that SWAPO claims was unprovoked and almost derailed the peace accord. In July, the South African administrator-general for Namibia, Louis Pienaar, agreed to remove some

Photographs by Guy Tillim/Afrapix

A DTA campaigner from the Ovahimba tribe.

Koevoet members from the northern SWAPOL force after the UN's special representative in Namibia, Martti Ahtisaari, protested that they had "created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation among much of the population in the northern region."

SOUTH AFRICA HAS OCCUPIED NAMIBIA since invading the German-controlled territory in 1915. Since then, it has governed "South-West Africa" as a fifth province in its apartheid system. South African administrators and protégé governments have administered the multinational-dominated mining industry (representing the bulk of the Namibian economy), controlled transport and communications, and will continue to operate Namibia's only deep-water port at Walvis Bay. In 1971, the International Court of Justice declared South Africa's occupation of Namibia illegal, and two years later the UN recognized SWAPO as the "sole and authentic representatives of the Namibian people." Sixteen years and billions of rand later—the war is estimated to have cost South Africa up to $350,000 a day—Louis Pienaar was officially put in charge of the transition, which is supervised by the United Nations Transition Assistance Group. UNTAG has nearly five thousand personnel in the country, including one thousand police officers, most stationed up north to monitor SWAPOL. Fifteen hundred South African troops will remain in Namibia until the United Nations declares the election "free and fair."

But few trust that South Africa will administer the election fairly. They fear that more likely it will attempt to impose a "Mozambique-style" solution: sowing discord and instability through military and financial pressures. South Africa has already cut its direct financial aid to Namibia by over two-thirds; combined with Namibia's foreign debt of about $300 million, mostly to South Africa, these cuts are guaranteed to destabilize the fledgling nation. Whatever happens after the election next month, thousands of former members of the South African Defense Force (SADF), SWAPOL, Koevoet, and the Namibian territorial forces will remain inside Namibia—a spawning ground for a Namibian version of the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR), the South African–supported guerrilla movement that has wreaked havoc in Mozambique since its independence. Danny Tsongarero, a member of SWAPO's Central Committee, comments, "Look at the way [South Africa] destabilized Mozambique and Angola, and to a lesser extent Zimbabwe and Botswana. In none of these countries has it been as intimate as in Namibia—it knows every tap and wire here."

POLITICALLY, THE COUNTRY IS FRACTURED. Here in the populous north, it seems likely SWAPO will win a two-thirds majority in the upcoming election. But in the southern and eastern "homelands," the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA), a moderate party made up of whites and the Ovambo's traditional tribal rivals, hopes to block SWAPO from obtaining the 67 percent of the vote needed to pass a new constitution through the soon-to-be-created Constituent Assembly. The DTA and other opponents of SWAPO have made a campaign issue of the testimony of 150 ex-SWAPO prisoners, who claim that they and others (many of whom SWAPO claims were spies for South Africa) were tortured by SWAPO fighters and held in underground pits in Angola.

At times the antics of the election campaign have taken on Chicago proportions: UNTAG, the group officially monitoring the election, admits that busloads of white South Africans have been crossing the border of Namibia to register to vote—attempting to tip the margin against SWAPO. Altogether, the country has seen a proliferation of forty-three political parties, many of which are forging new political alliances as the election approaches.

Though SWAPO issued an election manifesto calling for a mixed economy to close the gap between black poverty and white wealth, and for controls over some of the world's richest fishing and mining reserves, the campaign has centered around the simple question of who will bring peace and food after years of war and drought. Down fifteen miles of white sand track north of Oshakati, a palsied and sun-beaten grandfather, wearing a German soldier's jacket from World War II, sits on the sand outside his *kraal* and articulates his politics: "One man puts you in the fire, another takes you out. We will vote for the man who takes us out of the fire. . . . Many of us have children who have gone. SWAPO has taken care of our children and is bringing them back. It is the wild animal of the people."

THE DTA, MEANWHILE, IS CAMPAIGNING on a platform of "saving" Namibia from SWAPO "terrorists" and "communists," championing private enterprise, education, the sanctity of the family, and God. Most of the church community in this highly Christian nation, however, rides behind SWAPO, which has nurtured this connection through years of struggle.

For most of the five thousand white farmers who own more than 70 percent of Namibia's best farmland, the political differences between SWAPO and the DTA seem irrelevant. Their defiance surfaces through bumper stickers like one that proclaims, SLEEP WITH A SOUTH-WESTER, WE NEED MORE OF THEM, and through farmers' local defense units set up by the SADF that are still in place. "I don't think most of us will leave, but we fear SWAPO will not respect our property, ownership, religion, law and order as we know it," says David Keyser, on his ten thousand–acre cattle farm in Tsumeb. Keyser comes from the conservative stock that runs South Africa—an Afrikaner and National Party member, he is also a former tracker for Koevoet. His options are limited: move next door, to South Africa, or stay through a probable SWAPO victory to hold onto what he believes is rightfully his. "The SADF trained us to defend ourselves, gave us weapons. We trained our wives, children, and laborers, formed area force units. We've been disbanded, but the structures are there, and we could do the same thing again."

FOR DECADES NAMIBIA WAS A TESTING ground for South Africa's apartheid legislation, and a training field for its troops. Namibia remains an experiment, a trial—challenging SWAPO's ability to transform itself from a liberation movement to a political party to a parliamentary government—and a conspicuous test of the UN's ability to broker a peaceful transition in volatile areas. Taunted by ties between SWAPO and the African National Congress, it also challenges South Africa to adapt to a Namibian government that will probably be composed of those it once considered "revolutionaries"—a portent, perhaps, for its own day of reckoning.

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