

HISTORY OF

S.W.A.P.O.

(South West Africa Peoples Organisation)

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to the Australasia and Pacific region  
for the Australian and Pacific African Studies'  
Association Conference

held at Melbourne University on 23-25 August, 1986.



## INTRODUCTION

SWAPO (South West Africa Peoples Organisation) of Namibia was founded on 19 April, 1960 at a secret meeting of a group of Namibian patriots in the capital city of Windhoek. They came together with the realization from several decades of bitter anti-colonial resistance that there was a need for a mobilization of the whole nation beyond local particularistic interests if the struggle for national liberation against the racist South African administration was to succeed. Such a mobilisation required the direction of a vanguard political movement which could "organize, unite, inspire, orient and lead" and hence the formation of SWAPO as a modern political organisation.

## PRE-HISTORY

Before describing the stages of SWAPO's development over the 26 years of its existence as a liberation movement which is the subject matter of the paper, it is helpful to 'set the scene' by considering forms of the earlier anti-colonial struggle in Namibia and particularly that of the decade or so preceding the formation of SWAPO.

Under German rule which lasted from 1884 to 1915, there were a number of armed uprisings in protest at many Namibians' forced eviction from their land and restriction to barren reserves. These uprisings were only crushed by the German military after years of struggle. Losses to the Namibian people were devastating, for example, in the Herero and Nama uprisings from 1904 to 1907 over two-thirds of the Herero and Nama people were massacred by German troops and many more died in prison camps. A similar war was also fought by the Ovambo people of northern Namibia against Portuguese colonial expansion around the same time. In this war many thousands of Ovambo people lost their lives.

When South Africa assumed administration of Namibia after World War I, policies of racial and economic exploitation of the black majority were continued. In so doing, the racist South Africans violated the Mandate of the League of Nations which specified that the country, then known as South West Africa, must be administered in the interests of the indigenous people.

In the 1940s and 1950s, following the creation of the United Nations, traditional and church leaders chose to challenge the occupiers by submitting numerous petitions for independence to this body.

It was not until the tide of African nationalism began to sweep the continent in the 1950s that broad-based, national organization against South African colonial rule began to occur in Namibia. The first mass demonstrations occurred in 1954-55 against the contract labour system and it was taken up as a national campaign with the formation of the Ovamboland Peoples Organization in 1958 led by Dr. Sam Nujoma.

In the following year, 1959, a united front was formed consisting of a number of groups including the O.P.O. in opposition to the South African regime's attempt to drive the African population of Windhoek, the capital city, to an apartheid ghetto known as Katutura. This ended on 10 December 1959 when racist police fired on unarmed demonstrators, killing 13 and wounding 52. Many Namibian political leaders were arrested and Sam Nujoma amongst others was forced into exile. There these comrades began to lobby the U.N. and opened an office in Tanzania. This massacre which came to be known as the Windhoek massacre and is today commemorated as Namibia Women's Day, directly preceded the formation of SWAPO which was actually a re-launching of the O.P.O.

#### 1960-1966      LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Despite the bitter experience of the Windhoek massacre, SWAPO in its early stage set about mobilising the broad masses of the Namibian people for a sustained, multi-dimensional but still peaceful struggle against the unjust colonial order. SWAPO was successful

in organising mass political actions throughout the country but as this was seen as a direct threat to the racist regime, it could not be tolerated and was dealt with again through the use of terror and violence by the colonial forces. Many SWAPO members and activists were killed, some imprisoned and others were forced into exile. It was at this point that SWAPO decided that no longer could the Namibian people continue to suffer such violence and on 17 June, 1964 a decision was made to prepare for the armed struggle.

The decision to enter this phase of the struggle was also prompted by the failure of diplomatic and legal efforts to secure justice and independence for Namibia. In particular, Namibians were shocked by the ruling of the International Court of Justice at the Hague on 18 July, 1966 which rejected a judgement against racist South Africa's violation of its 'Mandate'. To Namibians this was a justification of an injustice and we felt we had been handed the choice of either dying in our beds or dying fighting.

#### 1966-1970    LAUNCHING OF THE ARMED STRUGGLE

On 26 August, 1966, combatants of PLAN (People's Liberation Army of Namibia), the military wing of SWAPO, engaged the racist enemy at Ongulumbashe in north-west Namibia in the first battle in the war of liberation. Freedom fighters grouped in small, fast-moving guerilla units were successful in attacking South African patrols, installations and 'puppet chiefs' throughout the northern border zone, causing panic and confusion amongst the white settlers.

Racist South Africa's response to some of their own medicine was to stage the first of its political show trials of SWAPO leaders and members. After the first military encounter with the racist enemy, the occupation army poured in troops and rounded up hundreds of Namibians for torture and interrogation. On 7 August, 1967, 37 Namibian patriots, including founder member of SWAPO, Secretary-General Toivo ya Toivo and pioneer workers leader, Cde Eliaser Tuhadeleni, were put to trial in Pretoria in a foreign country under the notorious Terrorism Act.

This evil law was made retroactive to 1962 specifically in order to convict the Namibian patriots. The trial was a mockery, all the prisoners having been tortured for months and compelled to sign confessions. On 8 February, 1968 the racist court sentenced 20 of the Namibian patriots to life imprisonment, 9 to 20 years hard labour and 5 to 5 years suspended. Speaking from the dock on that date, Cde Eliaser Tuhadeleni said :

"I came to realise that we could expect no progress from those who ruled us and that my children could expect no better life than I had. A peaceful struggle was not possible. We of SWAPO are not allowed to hold meetings and our leaders were victimised. I believe that we must take up arms for the freedom of my people, to liberate them from poverty and ignorance. And so I went into the forests with others. Our struggle against South Africa is an unequal one. I have seen the power of South Africa at Ongulum-bashe, but David slew Goliath because he had right on his side and we Namibians have faith that we, too, have right on our side."

Immediately after these Namibian patriots were sentenced, with the clear intention of silencing SWAPO and the oppressed Namibian people, the racist regime enacted new legislation in 1968 and 1969 to pave the way for both the full-scale implementation of apartheid in Namibia and its virtual incorporation into South Africa as a fifth province. Fortunately this latter dream of the Boer racists never materialised.

Throughout this period, the Namibian patriots who left the country immediately following the founding of SWAPO, worked hard to obtain both material and political support for the national liberation from the international community.

#### 1970-1972 TANGA TO GENERAL STRIKE

The decade of the 1970s opened for SWAPO with the Tanga Consultative Congress in Tanzania. SWAPO's administrative machinery was strengthened at this conference and new departments and mass organs were formed such as SWAPO Women's Council, SWAPO Youth League and SWAPO Elders Council.

- SWAPO Women's Council was born out of a recognition of the important role women play in the liberation struggle as was illustrated in the Windhoek demonstration in 1959. It is a fundamental belief of the Council that the liberation of women can only materialize after national liberation and that it is important

first to improve the basic conditions for survival of all Namibian women which means improving general economic and social conditions.

- The Youth have consistently been the most militant and courageous force in the Namibian struggle, spreading the ideology of liberation and are as such the generating power of SWAPO. SWAPO Youth League was later to stage mass work-outs, class boycotts in support of the struggle, mobilizing both students and working youth and popularising the struggle both in the sphere of politics and armed resistance.

- SWAPO Elders' Council was formed to allow elderly Namibians an active role in the Movement by offering their experienced guidance and wisdom.

On the international front, SWAPO was successful in gaining a ruling from the International Court of Justice that South Africa's occupation of Namibia was illegal under international law and demanding its immediate unconditional withdrawal. Namibians had never acknowledged the right of their colonisers to rule and exploit them but this ruling was significant in that it destroyed the last vestige of legitimacy South Africa could claim for its colonial administration.

This success on the international front contributed to the mass action by Namibian workers led by SWAPO cadres and their workers' organisation, the N.U.N.W. (National Union of Namibian Workers) in the general strike of 1971-2. During this strike well over 25,000 workers from farms, domestic services, mining, forestry, commerce and industry downed their tools and effectively resisted all attempts by the authorities to recruit scab labour. As a result, the country's economy came to a virtual standstill. Early in 1972 the South African police and troops were rushed to places such as Windhoek, Walvis Bay, Tsumeb, Combat, Keetmanshoop and to the northern part of the country. Meetings were broken up and workers and passers-by shot, and hundreds were rounded up and herded into hastily erected concentration camps. A state of emergency was declared in Northern Namibia.

It must be mentioned here that the majority of SWAPO are workers and peasants, producers by sweat of their own labour. It is their

interests above all that SWAPO represents and holds dear to its heart. Since the policy of apartheid has systematically destroyed the independent economic base of the peasantry, it is the workers on whom the future of independent Namibia mainly depends.

It is SWAPO's solid roots in the Namibian working people and progressive intellectuals which has enabled it to survive both the difficult years of repression in the 1960's and to emerge as the authentic representative of the true interests and aspirations of the Namibian people.

It was during this period that SWAPO moved its external headquarters to Lusaka, SWAPO having had representation there since Zambia gained independence in 1964.

#### 1972-1974      OPPOSITION TO BANTUSTAN PROGRAMME

The regime's response to the workers' strike was what was expected - more repression through violent attacks, imprisonment and torture. It was not successful in dampening the determination of Namibians to continue their opposition, however, so that when the regime embarked on its bantustan programme, there was a sustained and courageous campaign taken up by workers, youth and peasants, with strong church support, to destroy the political credibility and institutions of apartheid. In particular, there was a highly successful boycott of the bantustan elections in 1973. In the forefront of organisation of the boycott were SWAPO leaders and SWAPO Youth League. This action was the first to have the demonstrated support of the Namibian churches for it was at this time that the leadership changed into Namibian hands and the churches ceased to be spectators in the struggle for justice and peace, aligning themselves with their people and country.

#### 1974-1977      TURNHALLE - SOUTH AFRICA'S NEO-COLONIAL ANSWER

Following the collapse of the Portuguese colonial empire in 1974, which brought the People's Republic of Angola and the People's Republic of Mocambique into existence, the entire geo-political situation in the region changed dramatically in favour of the liberation forces. In the north, PLAN expanded and intensified the attack on the occupation regime's repressive forces which led finally in 1976 to the imposition of a state of emergency in the



four northern provinces which still applies to this day.

This change in the political situation in the region resulted in South Africa devising a new strategy in Namibia, that of trying to impose a neo-colonial settlement which could be sold abroad as an 'internal settlement' or 'exercise in self-determination'. Before the South African regime's chosen puppets even met, however, SWAPO generated such a level of popular mobilisation against the idea that it was doomed to fail.

Students along with other progressive groups including many in the south who had remained outside SWAPO up to this point, joined the Movement in a massive show of solidarity against the Turnhalle Conference. Over 10,000 young Namibians also joined SWAPO abroad after being forced into exile following their boycott of apartheid education in solidarity with their fellow students in South Africa in late 1976.

Faced with this mass opposition, racist South Africa was forced to shelve its plan to make the Turnhalle puppets an interim government. The five Western members of the U.N. Security Council at the time, however, put forward a proposal which offered South Africa a way out and bought it time. They offered to become mediators and approached some African countries and SWAPO asking to start discussions which according to them would lead to the implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 385 which set out principles and conditions to be observed in any transition to Namibia's independence.

These western powers who came to be known as the Contact Group or Gang of Five, SWAPO realised were also concerned about the changing political situation in southern Africa and the perceived threats to their interests in the region. Despite skepticism on this ground and that of the sincerity of South Africa given the experience of past abortive efforts, SWAPO agreed to be involved while reaffirming its commitment to revolutionary armed struggle.

1977-1980U.N. TALKS

It soon became clear that South Africa was not prepared to go along with Security Council Resolution 385 and that it was the Contact Group's intention to water down the principles laid down by the U.N. that would ensure free national elections.

The occupation regime prepared the ground inside Namibia for a rigged, illegal election and the Turnhalle Conference, now renamed the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance, set about bribing and intimidating the people to gain their support. The people of course were not prepared to support political mercenaries and opportunists even if it meant further suffering and they once more campaigned against a puppet government.

SWAPO held mass meetings from October 1977 when limited freedom to assemble was introduced but they were always violently attacked by South African elements. More detentions and killings followed along with the use of thugs to create an appearance of tribal conflict.

Meanwhile the Contact Group continued to mediate and at 'proximity talks' held in New York in 1978, SWAPO made considerable concessions to the U.N. proposal in order to give peace a chance.

South Africa delayed its acceptance of the terms until April 1978 but then only a week later on May 4, sent its troops across the Namibian/Angolan border and carried out a brutal massacre of over 1000 Namibian refugees at the Kassinga Education Centre. This attack along with a round-up of SWAPO leaders and intimidation of SWAPO supporters in March and April, was clearly designed to torpedo the 'talks'.

Later in 1978, South Africa announced rejection of the plan, illustrating clearly that it never intended to allow elections to take place unless their puppets could be assured of success. It came out that during the delay period early in the year South Africa had conducted a poll of the Namibian population which confirmed SWAPO's popularity. The South Africans had taken note of the Zimbabwe factor - the misjudgement by the white population

there of the Africans support for the Patriotic Front ZANU-ZAPU over Muzorewa and their consequent electoral defeat.

Negotiations dragged on during the rest of 1978 and 1979. In May 1979 South Africa went ahead to install the DTA as an interim government, transferring limited powers to it and renaming it the National Assembly, without a word of protest being uttered from the Western powers. Of course the move was condemned by SWAPO who vowed to fight it as well as by the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly with the results being declared null and void by them.

Meanwhile, the U.N. Security Council adopted a further Resolution 435 which set out conditions for the holding of free and fair elections under the supervision and control of the U.N. and for a constitutional conference to precede independence. We are still waiting for the day to arrive when racist South Africa will accept the inevitability of Namibia's independence and allow the implementation of this Resolution.

Throughout this period all organised opposition within Namibia was severely repressed. Most of the SWAPO leadership had been rounded up in April 1978 and then re-detained prior to the installation of the 'interim government' the following year. Some church leaders were also detained as a result of their statements against the puppet regime. Legislation was introduced at this time which allowed workers who went on strike to be punished as if they were 'SWAPO terrorists'.

Toughened by two decades of struggle under such conditions SWAPO's party organisation remained resilient and cadres continued to operate underground. The effectiveness of the organisation was demonstrated in August 1978 when tens of thousands of Namibians turned out to welcome the U.N. Commissioner for Namibia and then again in May 1979 to protest the latest police round-up of their leaders.

As a result of the systematic repression of open political activity, young Namibians continued to swell the ranks of PLAN to combat the regime openly. Since 1979 when there was a highly successful season of military activity waged by PLAN against the occupy-

ing forces, there has been a steady escalation of the military campaign to the point that the armed struggle has for some time now played the leading role in the liberation struggle as a whole.

#### 1980 TO PRESENT

The Linkage Issue - With the advent of the Reagan administration in 1980 the process for bringing about a peaceful solution in Namibia reached a deadlock. Instead of mediating, the United States of America started to introduce its own conditions on Namibia's independence to satisfy its own as well as racist South Africa's imperialist aims in Southern Africa, namely the withdrawal of Cuban troops from the People's Republic of Angola. At the same time the U.S. began clandestinely supporting the bandit movement, UNITA, in Angola. Support for UNITA has been part of apartheid South Africa's strategy to destabilize the whole region along with support for other puppet movements in Mocambique, Lesotho and elsewhere.

SWAPO totally rejected this 'linkage' condition as a totally irrelevant and extraneous issue and defended along with other truly democratic and peace-loving nations the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the People's Republic of Angola. Accordingly, SWAPO declared that the Contact Group should be dismissed.

Because of SWAPO's continuing political and military successes against the occupying regime and its puppets, racist South Africa was again forced to U.N. talks in Geneva in 1981. South Africa was considerably embarrassed at these talks when its deceitful manoeuvring this time backfired. South Africa had proposed that SWAPO should be negotiating with the Turnhalle group as they were supposedly the legitimate governing body in the country. During talks, however, 11 out of 12 of the group comprising Turnhalle turned on South Africa, declaring that they were not opposed to SWAPO. It was also clear that puppets could not sign a ceasefire with SWAPO when they did not even possess an army.

Following these talks, Turnhalle was in disarray. Many leaders who previously co-operated with the regime or who remained quiet

began allying themselves with SWAPO. This left only a few puppets and South Africa found that they could not claim any credibility for them. This situation led South Africa to again assume direct control of Namibia.

Namibianization of the War - After their failure to destroy SWAPO politically and militarily at home and diplomatically abroad, South Africa began to employ new tactics in an attempt to undermine SWAPO and turn Namibians against Namibians.

They sponsored spies to join the ranks of SWAPO and many of these have only recently been flushed out. They also introduced legislation in various stages which resulted in November 1984 in all able-bodied Namibians between the ages of 17 and 55 being forcibly conscripted into South Africa's occupation army. South Africa's intention here is to turn the armed conflict between Namibian patriots and its army of occupation into a civil war.

The so-called South West Africa Territory Force which South Africa created in 1980 as a puppet army with no national purpose is also part of South Africa's strategy to destabilize the whole of Southern Africa through surrogate groups supported by the apartheid State. Its purpose is to serve South Africa's interest now and in the future in the same manner as UNITA in Angola & the Mocambique National Resistance in that country.

SWAPO's political activists and allied organisations inside Namibia such as the churches busied themselves mobilising people against Pretoria's conscription campaign as they had already done against the political manoeuvres of the occupiers. This led to many potential conscripts crossing over to join PLAN which in turn allowed new military fronts to be opened up inside the country.

At further U.N. talks held in Lusaka in 1984 South Africa tried along with the West to put pressure on Angola to stop SWAPO logistic operations from its territory. SWAPO and Angola firmly rejected this pressure. At these talks again it became clear that it was only a small unrepresentative group of Namibian political opportunists that continued to ally themselves with South Africa and that SWAPO had the overwhelming support and recognition of the

main community groups and organisations in the country.

In response to the broadening of the armed struggle to encompass two-thirds of the country and SWAPO's increasing prominence amongst the people, the regime in early 1984 took further repressive steps in imposing martial law throughout the northern region. This comprised of a dusk to dawn curfew and a severe restriction on any movement. Daily harrassment and abuses of the people were the order of the day whether they were suspected SWAPO members or supporters or not. This curfew and the constant harrassment and abuse continue to this day to be perpetrated against the Namibian people by the occupation forces.

South Africa committed a further tactical blunder with the release in November 1984 of a number of Namibian patriots who had been serving long-term prison sentences on Robben Island. Amongst them was SWAPO Secretary-General Toivo ja Toivo. By releasing these prisoners South Africa had hoped to create a division in SWAPO ranks but once returned to their people our comrades reaffirmed their total support and commitment to SWAPO.

Multi-Party Conference - In June 1985 South Africa once more bypassed and delayed the implementation of Resolution 435 by setting up yet another puppet administration, the so-called Multi-Party Conference or Multi-Puppet Confusion as it is more aptly named. Control of the police and army remain directly in South African hands. Meanwhile, the South African regime with the support of the Reagan administration has continued to press for modifications of Resolution 435 such as the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola and this despite its own aggression against that country, both directly and indirectly through UNITA.

Throughout 1985 and 1986 PLAN has continued to tie down over 100,000 occupationist troops and it has successfully carried out numerous military operations against the racist South African presence.

SWAPO has also continued to broaden its support as well as support

for the implementation of U.N. Resolution 435 inside Namibia. In contrast, the M.P.C. is disunited and completely ineffective. SWAPO meetings and demonstrations have continued to be held despite the harrassment and charges of illegality.

On 25 July, 1986 the first legal meeting of SWAPO in five years was held at Windhoek and the 25,000 people who attended was a clear message to the South African regime and its puppets of the political consciousness of the Namibian people and SWAPO's ever-growing support.

### SWAPO'S ACHIEVEMENTS

The 26 years of political and military struggle have firmly established the ideals and convictions of SWAPO in the hearts and minds of the Namibian people.

As the authentic expression of the wishes and aspirations of the masses of our people SWAPO has proved to be a truly mass organisation. SWAPO has also stood firm over the years where others retreated and advanced where others compromised which led to its crowning as the sole and authentic representative of the oppressed but struggling Namibian people.

SWAPO's achievements can be categorized into four areas :

#### 1. The Armed Struggle.

The People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) is an expression of our people's courage, determination and tenacity. The fighting experience of PLAN's combatants has given Namibians a new hope and a new spirit of unity and common destiny. This is why the freedom fighters have the overwhelming support of the Namibian people who long ago accepted the necessity of taking up arms to rid themselves of the colonialist and racist menace of South Africa.

It is only as a result of the success of the armed struggle SWAPO has been waging that South Africa has been forced to the negotiating table. SWAPO has proven that South Africa's military is not

invincible after all.

In a protracted struggle, perseverance and conviction ensures final victory. SWAPO has a patriotic fighting youth while the occupation forces are demoralized and deserting in increasing numbers. It is this development as well as the steady progress of liberation of Namibian territory on which SWAPO and its armed wing, PLAN's achievements should be judged.

## 2. The Political Struggle.

SWAPO has convincingly succeeded over the 26 years of its existence in obtaining the political support of the overwhelming majority of the Namibian people ( it is estimated by South African polls that between 70-80% of Namibians would choose SWAPO as their future government).

This support has been obtained through a process of political education and mobilisation of the people over the years against racist South Africa and its puppets and in preparation for self-liberation.

SWAPO has also endeared itself to the people through its Political Programme adopted in 1976 which commits the Party to a socialist transformation of Namibian society.

## 3. The Diplomatic Front.

On the diplomatic level SWAPO has effectively campaigned for the course of the Namibian people. It is for this reason that SWAPO has gained recognition from the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity as the sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people. SWAPO is also a full member of the Non-Aligned Movement. Moreover, a number of countries have accorded SWAPO diplomatic status and we have established in all 28 embassies in capital cities throughout the world.

Having this world recognition as an authentic liberation movement, SWAPO also enjoys concrete humanitarian assistance from the United Nations, African countries, socialist and Nordic countries, Non-Aligned nations and other friendly countries.



#### 4. Nationhood Programme.

SWAPO has made every effort to prepare the Namibian people for the challenges of nationhood. For this reason, SWAPO has established educational institutions at pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary levels and placed many more Namibians in universities and colleges all over the world. In 26 years SWAPO has educated more Namibians than racist South Africa in its 71 years of occupation of the country. As well, in the Health and Education Centres in Angola and Zambia which accommodate over 100,000 Namibian refugees, SWAPO has undertaken adult literacy programmes and health training schemes.

In collaboration with the U.N. Council for Namibia, we set up the U.N. Institute for Namibia, and have worked out a Nationhood Programme for Namibia under which a series of research studies have been carried out and pre-planning projects formulated, all in preparation for the reconstruction and development of our country to meet the interests and needs of our people.

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SWAPO remains committed to continue with the political and armed struggle in order to frustrate racist South Africa's colonial schemes. The armed liberation struggle will certainly be intensified to make South Africa pay the price of occupation and the economic and strategic benefits it and its western allies seek to gain from it.

Outside Namibia, SWAPO will continue to call for practical solidarity from the international community to the 100,000 displaced Namibians and for pressure to be put on the racist regime of South Africa to accept and allow implementation of Resolution 435.

SWAPO maintains that the root cause of the political and armed conflict in the whole southern African region is the apartheid system and the illegal occupation of Namibia. We reject Reagan's destructive policies of constructive engagement and linkage and continue to advocate for the application of comprehensive sanctions against South Africa by the international community to effect a complete isolation of the regime until such time as it dismantles apartheid and accords all South Africans as well as Namibians equal political, economic and social rights.

