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Yale-UN Oral History Project

Hawa Binta Dieye

James Sutterlin, Interviewer

June 23, 1998

New York, New York

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James Sutterlin: Thank you very, very much, Ms. Dieye, for agreeing to participate in this Yale oral history project, and I would like very much to ask you questions today concerning your experience as a UN Secretariat employee in the field in Namibia. I would like to begin by asking what were you doing in the United Nations before you went to Namibia? How were you selected, or did you volunteer?

Binta Dieye: Yes, I did volunteer. I was working as a researcher in the Department for Economic and Social Affairs, and when I heard about the mission I was very, very excited to be part of the birth of a nation. And in view of my own experience--I am from Senegal--I was very, very excited, and I did volunteer.

JS: So, you volunteered. What kind of preparation did you have for going on this mission?

BD: As I recall, I think there was some briefing about what the UN had been doing so far to help Namibia, the political situation. Those are the main things I do remember. But I think that for that mission, it was really the unusual enthusiasm that was really important, and we all had it. I know that for myself I really had it. So, that was really

what had prepared me, so I was willing to work long hours, to put up with so many things, because I really believed in it.

JS: So, you knew about Namibia before you went? In other words, did you have a special affinity for the question of Namibia, because you do come from Africa?

BD: Yes, definitely, because I knew what it was to be under colonization. When my country had reached independence, I was still a child, so in a way I was reliving my childhood, and also I was experiencing what it must have been for my parents. So, for me it was really doubly exciting.



JS: And what job did you go into in Namibia? What were your duties there?

BD: I was lucky, because when I arrived I was told that I would be working in an office in Swakopmund. Swakopmund is a beautiful city by the sea. And I was I think...

JS: Let me just ask you for a moment to spell that. I am having some trouble finding these places on a map...

BD: I think it is S-w-a-k-o-p-m-u-n-d--I am not so sure, but it is a very well known city; it is by the sea. I was number three... Everybody was telling me "Oh, how lucky you are, how lucky you are" but to tell you the truth I was saying to myself I wonder if just to be in a beautiful city by the sea... I just felt it was not really what I would want to do.

And I was very lucky in the sense that in Windhoek there is a place called Katutura and that is a black township, and the person who was supposed to take over that area, to be head of the district center, it was man, he had not arrived yet, so I kept telling the office of Mr. Ahtisaari, "It is such an important place, you just cannot wait until you fill the position. Why don't you let me open it up, and when the person comes I will just go to my beautiful resort place." Everybody was saying "No, you cannot give such a position to a woman; it is a dangerous place--because if the political situation falls there, if it doesn't work, it is the whole Namibia situation that will fall." So, it was really a challenge. And they told me "OK--you take it for two or three weeks." I was very excited. I went and I was able to hold the position because I had made contacts. By the time the person who was supposed to get the job... this person came I think a month later, it was just... not 'not feasible', but it wouldn't be advantageous to bring a new person, since I was able to have my own contacts and do many things. So, that's why I say I was lucky, because I was put truly in a challenging situation.

JS: And what was this office like? There were various district offices throughout Namibia, right?

BD: Yes.

JS: And this was one that was right in Windhoek?

BD: Yes, it was in Windhoek. And it was in the black township. It was very interesting because when I went there, people didn't believe in the UNTAG mission. I don't know if you recall, on April 1st, SWAPO members had entered Namibia thinking they would find UN people, and I think 400 SWAPO people had been killed. So, when I went to Katutura, really, there were no welcoming signs, people were very, very angry with the United Nations. So, it took a lot of explaining, saying that we were not there. They felt that we were there, we had just crossed our arms and let people get killed. I had to explain, "We were not there." And that really took a lot. So that was one.

And two, they were not very confident that a woman could protect them from SWAPOL police and all that. They were saying that the UN was not taking this thing very seriously, to send a woman to Katutura. So, it was quite challenging.

JS: So, there was then, full knowledge there--which was after all in Windhoek--of what happened on the border and the fact that the UN had agreed to the departure from cantonment of some of the South African military. They were aware of that, where you were?

BD: Yes, they were quite aware, because as you say it was in Windhoek, and it was really like the nerve center for the black population for the rest of the country. You had many, for example, SWAPO, they were very well informed, and they were very radical, and they were in Katutura, so they were very much informed of what was going on. And as I said, we needed a lot of information to bring back the trust. A lot of work had to be done.

JS: What did you see as your main tasks, then?

BD: Myself, it was at a different level. For example, for the older generation it was to make them believe that independence was possible. I would go up to a church and I would tell them that, “in a year’s time you will be independent.” Old people would just laugh because for them it seemed impossible. And two, to let them know that they were not alone. They were led to believe that nobody cared about them, and when I told them that I had heard about their country when I was still in Senegal, they were really, really amazed, and shocked. They said “Really? Other countries know about us?” And I would say, “Yes! And if you fail, if you don’t participate in this process and the whole process fails, you will let down not only yourself but so many people around the world.” That was really a big thing, for them, to realize that they were not alone and that they were known all around the world.

JS: Now, you mentioned SWAPOL--what was the security situation like in the township?

BD: In the township you had SWAPOL, and when I arrived they were very much afraid of SWAPOL, and they were always talking about the ‘Koevoet.’ Yes. The beginning was difficult because one of my tasks was to reduce political intimidation, and so to ask people to come and report on activities of SWAPOL was very difficult. And I know that SWAPOL was doing incredible things. The turn-around for me was when the

first returnees started coming back, and there was a law that had not been repealed then that said something ridiculous like “ten black people”--I think it was ten, I don’t remember the number, but some ridiculous number--“could not be together.” And so many people wanted to go to the airport to receive the first returnees. They were coming to my center and saying “OK, now we are going to test this--you keep telling us to come and report political intimidation, intimidation by SWAPOL, we want to let you know that we are going to the airport, and we are going to see what we are going to do.” And I did tell the UN police, and I went to the airport, and SWAPOL was there and armed to the teeth, and there were hundreds of people from Katutura that had gone to the airport, hundreds of black people, and it was essential for me: I had to show that they can be protected. I didn’t know how, what I was going to do, but I showed up, and I kept walking between the crowd and the police, the SWAPOL, back and forth, back and forth, to make myself very visible.

JS: With some UN identification?

BD: Yes. By then they knew me. But just the fact that I was not afraid and I was there, it was pure luck that the SWAPOL police did not turn them back, and the crowd was very... was not unruly. They waited patiently when the returnees came, the first plane came and they started dancing and chanting. That was really for me the first turning point. From then, they would come to the district, the center to report any time there was a problem. Up to that, they did not trust me that much.

JS: Was Civpol already there at that point? Did you have a contingent of Civpol?

BD: We came at roughly the same time, and we did work together. Civpol's main mandate was to monitor SWAPOL, and, myself, I dealt with political intimidation, but often it overlapped, so we had to work very closely.

JS: What was the geographic makeup of the Civpol contingent there?

BD: There were a lot of nationalities, but I know the head was from Jamaica, and he was really excellent. He was a photographer, his hobby was photography, and he was able to get so much popular support because he would take pictures of people and then give them copies of the pictures, and then he was very, very popular, and in fact it helped us a lot.

JS: Now, in some places, not in Namibia, but other places, Civpol had some problems with communication. Was there a language problem at all in the township, in terms of communication between Civpol, or between your office and the local people?

BD: No, because everybody did speak English.

JS: Everyone spoke English there.

BD: Yes. In fact, that was one of the problems that they had before with the authorities: they made it a point to know English, versus Afrikaans. So, there were no problems, everybody spoke English.

JS: Now, you mentioned--I don't know how to pronounce it exactly--Koevoets. Were there any Koevoet people there?

BD: The population would tell me, but, myself, I really didn't have any experience. But I must say that SWAPOL itself was enough. We had a lot of acts to investigate about brutality by SWAPOL. But the amazing thing was that the inspector of SWAPOL and I had an incredible relation. I think also that was because in the beginning he felt that... he didn't take too seriously a woman, and up to today I don't understand what was the reasoning behind certain of his actions, that inspector, because I would go to his office and often, himself, he would tell me "Oh, we have detained so-and-so." Then I would tell the UN police, and they would tell me "No, they shouldn't take them too seriously--I'm sure they are giving us this information because you are a woman, so it is misinformation." But on my own I would go and check the information and it would turn out to be correct. So, very often I would wonder "But, why?" Because often they really made my job easier because, themselves, they would tell me what they were doing. I know in the beginning it was just because they were being condescending, saying, "OK, we will give her this information and we'll see what she is going to do with it."

JS: So, it in that sense you think perhaps the fact that you were a woman was an advantage rather than a disadvantage?

BD: I don't know either or. But all I know is that in the beginning I had to... I mean even the population, itself, really didn't think that I could protect them, that a woman can protect them. I know the UN police also felt "Oh, good brother! We need so much help and they are sending us a woman here! And somebody who even never worked in the political field." I know from all angles I really had to prove. But later on I realized that actually it was an advantage because I realized something that I even didn't know before, was that women have more of a capacity for peacekeeping. With the UN police, many times things would happen and they would tell me "Listen, we have to now advise Ahtisaari that this thing now is hopeless." For example, one member of one party would kill a member of another party, and it had happened a couple of times and they would tell me "Let's forget it. By tomorrow I can guarantee you there is going to be bloodshed everywhere, and if there is bloodshed in Katutura it is going to be all over Namibia." And I was always willing to go one more time to talk to the leaders of the party, even some times in the middle of the night, to tell them "Please, if you let one or some members of your party retaliate, this is over." Of course, they would tell me "We cannot tell our members what to do," but I just know that many times I did it and by the morning we didn't have the bloodshed that the UN police were thinking was going to happen. So, I can say actually, to answer your question, it was an advantage.

JS: You say there was hostility between the parties. Now, there were no landowners in Katutura. What were the parties that were hostile to each other?

BD: It was SWAPO, DTA, and there were other parties also, but it was mainly SWAPO and DTA. I remember even before we had the code of conduct between the parties, I had begun to invite some political leaders in my district, and the first time they came you could feel the hate, it was just incredible. But I had decided to do it as a weekly affair, and by the third or fourth, they were shouting at each other, but at least they were talking to each other.

JS: You were able to bring the parties' leaders together in that way.

BD: Yes.

JS: In that sense, you served as a kind of a mediator, or at least...

BD: Yes, and I do remember that after independence I was very happy to hear many of the representatives of the political parties recognizing that role and telling me "The first meeting you called, we were saying 'This woman is crazy, there is no way that I am going to be in the same room as this fellow.'"

JS: But it did work?

BD: Yes, it really did work.

JS: And you mentioned the code of conduct. I think that was developed partly when the Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar came, and for the first time met with the leaders of the parties together. I judge from what you said that that had an effect within... that trickled down to the township, the code of conduct?

BD: Yes, it helped me. I had already started the meetings, but now we had something, a piece of paper, to show them and say, "Listen, we have to follow this. For example, let's not insult the leaders of such-and-such parties, in my meetings." So, when they would start to insult each other, I would say, "No, no, no, let's remember the code." So, I was using that in my meetings.

JS: Did the fact... let's say, were people aware, in the township for example, of the fact that the Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar came there and met with people? Did this enhance in any way the image of the United Nations there or not?

BD: It was great because Katutura was one of the areas the Secretary-General chose to visit; so he did come to Katutura, and he had an incredible welcome. People came. I was nervous at first because I was saying, "Will people come? Are they still angry with the UN?" But people came, yes.

JS: By that time, then, and it had a good impact?

BD: Yes, they had a good impact. By that time really, there was a good feeling towards the UN.

JS: On the other side, I have heard that in the early days after the problems in the north, that there was a strong feeling against Mr. Ahtisaari. Did that last, did that skepticism about Ahtisaari last?

BD: Yes, it was mainly from SWAPO, and Mr. Ahtisaari himself was saying “Good.” Because in the beginning the other side were saying that he was too close to SWAPO and now SWAPO was complaining, so he was saying “Good, at least I cannot be accused anymore of being too close to SWAPO.” It was understandable, but it really didn’t last. I know that after independence Ahtisaari was invited and he has a street, I understand, or something like that. I mean, it was understandable, because when people are afraid, when so much is at stake and they were worried that maybe the UN was not aware of everything and they were getting nervous. That is understandable, and Ahtisaari symbolized the whole United Nations there. So, that was quite understandable and I don’t think even Mr. Ahtisaari took it personally.

JS: Now, did the military peacekeepers have any role in the township? What was your relationship with them?

BD: It was funny because in Katutura we had nightclubs, and so many of the military I saw them because of the nightclubs. I had to go and talk to the general and say “Please, I don’t want to see any more of your militaries in my zone.” So, on that aspect I don’t think I was very popular. Later on, it was good because the military did come and help to rebuild some areas in Katutura, schools, community centers. That was very helpful. But in Katutura, no, we didn’t need the military.

JS: They didn’t do anything?

BD: No, no.

JS: Well, for one thing, there were no South African forces in the camps there...

BD: Exactly.

JS: You mentioned the political parties, and you had to bring them together. How much of a learning process was it for you to learn about the political distinctions within the African community there?

BD: For me, no. But I must say that for the community itself, what was really interesting was that this was a new country and even among SWAPO, the youth was very educated, very militant. Yet they used to ask me questions that would really take me back. For example, they would ask me, “Could you explain to us, after independence,

what is the role of political parties? What do you need political parties for?" I realized that they were really still a lot of political education to be done, because for them independence was the end of all. So, they couldn't understand why, after that, you still need political parties. What I really learned much [about] was not in the political area was in the human relations, the human relationship area. When I went there, I must say, being African I was very afraid of white South Africans; I felt assaulted, I believed that every white South African was racist, and even to be physically next to a South African, I remember the first time it happened I was really shaking. I said "Oh my god, what is the person going to do to me?" And then after having contact and talking, it was really amazing: you forget color and you don't assume the other person's position.

And also I saw it also in Namibia. People really themselves have told me that they used to be racist, but they recognized it was because they never had contacts with blacks. And that really showed me, I said to myself, "My goodness, people who used to hate each other for years and years, and in a matter of months..." So, it takes longer to hate than to break up the wall of hate. That was for me a major, major lesson. I remember I used to say "My god, how long will it take for the other side to forget and forgive?" But really, apparently the human spirit is really quite quick to forgive and to love. That was really, for me, one of the major, major lessons.

JS: How many were in the district office with you?

BD: We were a small... I had a deputy, Shalan Alayan, and there was also an assistant with us, Ruth Gobin, who dealt mainly with the refugees. She was supposed to be my

secretary but she was so good with the refugees--because so many refugees were coming back to Katutura; they didn't know anywhere else to go, even though they were not from Windhoek. But they didn't know where their relatives were, so it was easier for them to come to Katutura, and Ruth was so patient, listening to them tell their stories. They needed to speak, to talk. And she would refer them to social services where they could find food or shelter or try to find their relatives. So, we were really a team of three internationals, plus we had local people. And during the registration and election itself, then we had people who came from all over...

JS: The volunteers...



BD: The volunteer who came from headquarters or other parts of the system.

JS: Tell me, how did you go about the preparations for the elections? I judge you had, in a way, three phases. The first phase in establishing some kind of confidence in the United Nations. And the second phase, perhaps, would you say, in communicating some idea of what democracy was about? Were you able to do that?

BD: Yes. I don't know about the big philosophy about democracy, but really what the main emphasis was that each person, one vote--that was really my speech. And that it was confidential, because people were still afraid that people would know how they voted. So, really, it was at that level that I made most of my talks. I used to go to church--and in fact also to show that the linkages between that act of voting and being free, being

independent. I used to go to church and explain that, and also talk to the old people who didn't know how to write, to show them how to make a cross.

JS: I wanted to ask that. How much of a problem was that--literacy?

BD: In Katutura it was a big problem. It was amazing for us--to write a cross, we take it for granted, that anybody could do that. But it was not evident. I remember I was teaching a group of women how to make a cross, and after two hours they really knew how to make the cross, and then a lady, she came to me and she said, "You had completely confused me." I said "Why? You know how to do it." She said "No, but because for the first part you were starting from the left, and suddenly now you started from the right. So now I'm lost. I don't know if the cross is supposed to start from the left or from the right." So, it was a big, big problem, but at least I taught them how to... even putting an 'X', with that you will be able to vote.

JS: How many churches--you mentioned the churches--I judge that in your duties the church was a rather important institution?

BD: Yes, well, it was not put in my duties, but when I went to Katutura I realized that there were so many churches and the church was a source of so much comfort and a big role in the community, so that if I really wanted to involve the community, I had to talk to the leaders of the church and I had to go to church myself. Even though I am a Muslim, I had to go. That was very, very important. And early on there was one big pastor who

was very helpful to me, because he was being harassed a lot by SWAPOL and he was a big figure in the community, and finally somebody told me about his predicament, and as I did go to him and said to him, "Please will you come with me and go to SWAPOL and register this complaint?" At first, he really skeptical, but he did come; he registered his complaint and all that. Immediately the harassment stopped. Then he invited me to come and speak to his church. And one thing led to another and I started really going to many, many churches. Plus, I really enjoyed going to the churches because it was really the community. I remember every time I would tell them that people knew about them, they would clap. They could just not believe that people knew about them. That was the most touching thing for me. I would tell them about the promise land, meaning the General Assembly hall with their seat behind the name "Namibia." I remember I used to tell them that on the day of their independence, even the angels would sing: Hallelujah! The faces in the church will beam with happiness.

JS: These were protestant churches, I judge?

BD: To tell the truth, I don't know.

JS: You didn't know that.

BD: No, I didn't know.

JS: I imagine they were. Now, I wanted to ask, was the population--were the familiar with the leaders of the parties, in particular with SWAPO, with Nujoma and so forth? Were they known figures there? Did he come there then?

BD: Oh yes. He was very much a known figure. When he came back to Namibia he came to live in Katutura, and when he registered and voted, everything was in Katutura because these were his people. There was no way that he could go and live in another part of town where blacks still had problems living in other parts. Even myself, I did have problems there finding a house, being black. I think it would have been shocking for him to come and then the first thing is to go outside of Katutura. Yes, they knew their leaders. I mean, there were not only supporters of SWAPO, you also had blacks who were supporters of the DTA, and other parties. But SWAPO was the biggest.

JS: And Nujoma was the most well-known figure?

BD: Definitely, definitely.

JS: He was Ovambo I believe, and the township, was it divided tribally or not?

BD: Yes, it was. And that was the most shocking thing I saw, because I knew there was apartheid but I didn't realize that even at the level of ethnic group--for example, I would come to a door and I would see an 'O', and I would not know why, but it was marked: Ovambo had to stay with Ovambo and that was the law. All the ethnic groups

had to stay with the ethnic group. That was really awful. And stories were fed against each group to separate them. But all the ethnic groups kept their pride. One of the most moving moments I experienced was at the beginning of the mission. I saw a couple in the poorest section of Katutura, a SWAPO section. It was sunset. They were young, tall and beautiful. The woman was holding a baby. It was at the time when there were a lot of doubts about the UN. They saw me from far with the UN car. They turned their backs, and walked away. Then the woman raised her fist in a SWAPO sign. A long angry arm in defiance saying, "We will never give up." I sat in the car and watched them disappear up the hill as the red sun was also disappearing. I felt like running after them and saying, "Don't be disappointed in us, the UN will fulfill its mandate."



JS: That was a policy of the South African Administration to separate different groups?

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BD: Yes. I knew about separating white from black, but I wasn't aware that there was also a policy to separate the different black ethnic groups. So, even in the township you would see a door and they would have to put 'O' or put 'H' for Herero. That was really, for me, really horrible to see that, to see the door and see 'O' as a marker. That was really horrible.

JS: Now, I think it was Mr. Ahtisaari's policy to try to eliminate the tribal aspect of the society there. Did you, for your part, try to discourage the tribal divisions?

BD: This is a difficulty because you don't want to eliminate that. For example, I am a Fulani, I am very proud of Fulani. "OK, we are different" but to respect each other's differences. But realize also you are one nation, one country, and to be proud of your diversity, of the differences. So, it was not a question of eliminating that, but so that anybody can live wherever they want, freely, that you are not forced to live in this area because you are Ovambo or to live in this area because you are Herero, or black, or white.

JS: Now, I was asking about the preparations for the election, the actual election. How did you go about that?

BD: I went almost from house to house, to really tell them that... I was almost taking it personally: "You guys, you have to vote. You have to vote." Everybody is saying there will be violence in Katutura and I am telling them there will be no violence--which is true, because the UN civil police were telling Ahtisaari that in Katutura there would be a lot of violence, and in fact they did make a wall around the police station, and I told Ahtisaari, "Please, I have been telling everybody in Katutura there will be no violence, come out and vote, and if I came and put a wall around my office they are going to say, 'Well, if she is afraid of something, something is coming.'" So, Ahtisaari, himself, had to decide between the UN police and myself and they said, "OK, Binta doesn't want a wall around her office." And I must say, the police afterwards were a little embarrassed because they had this big wall and they were the policemen! And they were afraid! So, you can imagine.

So, I didn't have a wall, and I went from house to house to tell them, "Really, you have to vote, you have to vote." And I remember the day of the voting, I did come very early, it must have been 4:00 in the morning and I was really very nervous, saying, "Please, I hope everybody comes." And already by 4:00, people were making a line, and I couldn't believe it. I was so ecstatic. And everything went peacefully.

JS: Now, before that there had been the registration, right?

BD: Yes, the registration. The registration was very interesting because there was an incident, and it was not reported--because I am the one who really begged one of the reporters who has seen it not to report it, and I will tell you why I had asked him not to report it. When the people from SWAPO, the leaders from SWAPO, came to register, there was one South African election officer who was so rude, who was so rude toward Ben Gurirab who later became the Minister for Foreign Affairs, he was so rude to him and was telling him "You cannot register, you have to go and bring me your mother and your father." It is obvious that this was a grown man--why ask him to go bring his mother and father? It was so bad for Mr. Gurirab because both his parents were dead, and even if they were alive there would be no point... And I was there and I talked to the South African election officer and I said, "If you don't let him register now, you are going to be in deep trouble." And he was very, very angry--we were really shouting at each other--and in the corner of my eyes I could see one reporter who was taking all this with his camera. All the other reporters had gone because they were saying, "This is boring. There is nothing happening here. This is boring." And he had stayed and I could see that

he was taking all that. I even remember what words I was using. It was so important that Mr. Gurirab be allowed to register because I knew otherwise the whole township will hear about it and they will say “Oh, you see? If a SWAPO leader has problems, how about us?” So, Mr. Gurirab was allowed to register, and later on I did talk to the journalist, who was Namibian, and said “Please, I know you have a fantastic story, but for the greater sake of what we are trying to achieve here, please.” And really, he was fantastic. He didn’t show the pictures. But Mr. Gurirab did talk to Ahtisaari and that election official was fired. He was not allowed... he had so much hatred, when he saw the face of Gurirab, he did recognize him as one of the SWAPO leaders, and it was just too much for him. But luckily he was fired.



JS: Because the election officers were South African, right?

BD: Yes, they were South African--I don’t remember now quite well--but you also had Namibians, but you also had South Africans. But I was able to ensure the registration of Mr. Gurirab because the UN had veto power over South Africa and that was important.

JS: But the actual registration was the responsibility of the South Africans...

BD: Of the South Africans, but they could use...

JS: Local personnel.

BD: Yes, yes.

JS: And it was not done in the UN office? It was done in other offices?

BD: Yes, it was done in other offices, selected in cooperation between the UN and the South Africans.

JS: I see, so in some districts it might have been in the UN office?

BD: I really don't remember, but in Katutura no. It was never in the UN offices. It was in the post office--no it was never... not in Katutura.

JS: Now, you mentioned the returnees, and that a lot of them came to Katutura, to the township, even though they had not originated there. And you say they were warmly welcomed--but did it also create any feeling of hostility? Who took care of them? Where did they live when they came?

BD: They lived later on with the population. It's a problem that afterwards I always point out to any UN person who I know is dealing with returnees because the receiving population say, "Hey, this is not fair. These people have gone outside, they had a beautiful life outside, while we were here being beaten up by the police and Koevoet, and now they come back and you guys give them money, food, and all that." So, of course it created resentment, and I did put it in my reports. That was one. And the population of

Katutura had... before it was a lot, it was around 60,000, but with all the returnees and people coming from the north looking for jobs it had swelled something between 80,000 and 100,000. It was really a lot, so there were a lot of problems of housing and even crime, because now there was really no money, so there were a lot of thieves, there were murders. That aspect I was really very, very worried of.

JS: And who had responsibility for settling them, for taking care of the returnees?

BD: UNHCR

JS: It was UNHCR.



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BD: But our office was helping them a lot on that. That lady I mentioned before, Ruth, was helping.

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JS: Because that's the next thing I wanted to ask, and that is the relationship between you and your office and the other UN agencies that were active there, and I judge there were NGOs that were active in the township, or were there not?

BD: The other UN agencies, since it was not independent yet, you didn't have all the different agencies, like the UNDP and all that, that would really come after the country is independent. But you did have UNHCR, and also you had a lot of NGOs, and we did

cooperate a lot. In the beginning they were very helpful to me. I went to them to have some idea of statistical data, so they were very helpful to me.

JS: Now, were they indigenous NGOs or were they external?

BD: They were both.

JS: Both. And you did not have difficulties with them? It worked well?

BD: Yes. There were really no problems.

JS: What was your chain of command, so to speak? You did reports--the reports went directly across the street to headquarters, so to speak?

BD: Yes. They did. To the regional... we had the regional director in Windhoek, and so I reported to Ahtisaari through that regional director.

JS: And what were your reporting duties? What did you report on?

BD: That was very interesting because since I had no expertise in political analysis, so I had no experience on how to write a political report, and Ahtisaari later on told me that that was what made my reports so interesting, because I didn't write like the usual UN report. I really wrote about sensing things, about feelings, and later on I did find that they

were as important. And Ahtisaari did get as much out of those reports than a lot of the dry reports, and I remember he used to circulate my reports everywhere. I used to report, of course, on political intimidation, what has been done to solve that, and what we were doing for the electoral process, registration and all that, and also really the views of the community--that I know Ahtisaari liked a lot, because it gave him a pulse for what was going on. And since Katutura really represented the whole country in terms of the black population, what people were thinking in Katutura invariably would show what people in the north, what black people in the north, were also thinking. So, he told me very often that he did like my reports.

JS: That must have been one of the most populous districts in the country? If not *the* most populous district.

BD: Yes. And Katutura was very well known. Every journalist that came wanted to see Katutura, wanted a briefing. Sometimes I was in the middle of two parties fighting or something, and journalists wanted a tour of Katutura, and I would just say, "OK, just come along." They would witness firsthand what was going on.

JS: What did you experience as your most serious problem there?

BD: I did mention before... but that was only in the beginning really, the fact that people were not very confident that a woman could protect them. That was really the main challenge. But after that, I must say each day was like a regular day. You tried to

do your job. There was really not anything that I felt, “My goodness, this is really impossible.” Because even between the parties that really hated each other, the fact that they started talking to each other... I know what was difficult for me was to see the poverty, and the poverty was such as I had never seen, because of the discrimination. I know that I had seen a woman with eight children and they were renting--that I had never seen anywhere in the world--they were renting a communal bath. That’s where they were living. At night when somebody needed to go to the bathroom, they had to get up with their children, go wait outside, until the person would go to the bathroom. When the person finished, they would go back. That was very hard to see. But mainly I remember the good things, because to bring hope to people, there is nothing more extraordinary. I remember the first time, in the beginning, when I was talking to people, they were very, very skeptical.

[end of side 1]

[side 2]

BD: ... saw a little girl, she came after me and she said to me “This independence you are talking about, will I be able to play the piano?” At first, I didn’t know what she was talking about, but I said, “Yes, of course you will be able to play the piano. Why?” It happened that she really loved music, but because of apartheid she could not go to school, to the conservatory. Only white kids could go. So, for her, that’s what independence was. It was really something, to be able to give hope to people. That’s what I really remember.

JS: And when all the volunteers came, was this a good thing? Were the standards high? What did you feel about the volunteers, to help with the election?

BD: Yes, really--this was one mission where rank really didn't matter. You had secretaries who were heading registration teams, and all that. Really. What mattered was that you were willing to work long hours, that you believe in the mission, and everybody seemed to have that. And up to now, every time you see somebody who has been to Namibia, that feeling is still there. Everybody keeps saying "That was the best mission." That's the same thing... the second mission that was almost as similar was Cambodia, that it moved me so much. So, yes, the volunteers, they had... all you needed, actually, was enthusiasm. And they all had it by the ton. People were writing me from Headquarters begging me, "Please, do anything. I have to come. I have to come." We could not accommodate all the people who wanted to come.

JS: What were your own living conditions like? You lived outside of Katutura?

BD: Yes, I lived outside. In the beginning I had found a beautiful house in Katutura and I wanted to live there. And then I decided to make it my office because it was so central, it was so nice. And I almost regretted it because after I almost couldn't find a place to live because my best friend Peggy Kelly is American, she is white, and she was working in Windhoek, she would go and look for houses, and of course they always told her, "yes, yes." And every time I showed up, it was "No way, no way." So after a while,

I was saying “Listen, now I think I am going to find something in Katutura and forget it.”

And one day Peggy called me and she said, “No, no, no, I have found a house, I have found a house.” And I told her “Please, did you tell her that I am from Senegal?” And she said, “Yes, of course, they know.” And I said, “But did you tell them where in Senegal? Because maybe they think Senegal is in Europe somewhere.” “No, no, they know you are black. They said, ‘No problem.’” And it’s true--I came. And over there, it was a very nice neighborhood. They had very nice neighbors--some were very nice, some were really awful. Some were awful. In fact, it was a place where black people used to live, but they were always pushed. So, the cemetery was still the cemetery of black people, but they were pushed, pushed, pushed, all the way to Katutura, and once they were in Katutura they couldn’t go back, even to the cemetery to visit the tombs of their dead relatives. In the neighborhood some people were still very racist. One day, I had a scary experience. It was Saturday morning and I was alone. Peggy had gone to visit other friends. She had left her car in our driveway. I think some of the neighbors pushed her car on to the street and called the police to make believe that I was disturbing the traffic. All I knew was that a policeman, a white policeman was banging on the door, yelling and screaming. I opened the door. When I saw that he had a big stick in his hand, I pretended that I was going to open the door wider. He pulled back and I slammed the door. I ran to close all the windows and the back door. He ran around the house, but I was faster. He continued to yell, banging the door and ordering me to open it. After almost two hours, he left. I had called and left a message with the security agent in Mr. Ahtisaari's office as soon as I realized I was in danger. The security agent never realized

the danger I was in and never sent anyone. He was later severely reprimanded. In fact, he was sent back to headquarters.

JS: One just kind of final question: can you describe a day, what was a day like in Katutura for you? You got there--what would you be doing as the district director, so to speak?

BD: The first thing, I would go to the office of the SWAPOL police. As I told you we had this strange relation. I would come, some time he offered me a cup of tea, everything was well, and he would volunteer information. And I would act on the information. The next day, or two days later, he wouldn't offer me tea and I would know he is angry, and I would try two more days later. Then I would go to the UN police to check whether during the night they had heard of any political intimidation, and then I would have to act on that. There was a big community center where you had a lot of different groups, and I would meet with them and know if there are any problems, any trouble. And usually I would stop at the SWAPO youth. In the beginning they were very tough on me, but later on we became very close. They were youth who really believed in the whole future and they were very worried about Walvis Bay, for example we used to have lengthy debates about that and I would tell them "Please let's just concentrate on what we need to do, and I can guarantee you that later on it will be yours. So, let's not just jeopardize the whole thing." After that I would go the center and there people would come and report; if there was political intimidation they would come, give their report, and I would help to follow on that. Eventually, before there were a ton of journalists who would come. So, that was

a regular day. But during registration I was heading registration teams, so we had to go to the different polls and see if everything was going well, to see if political parties were respecting the registration code and all that. It was a quite busy, busy day.

JS: Now, you were very close to the local headquarters, you saw UNTAG also from close at hand. Was it your impression... did you find that UNTAG was a logically functioning organization? That it was well led?

BD: Yes, I think Ahtisaari, Thornbury, Peggy Kelley, really did a great job. And the fact that they were decentralized in the regional districts also helped a lot. So, really little details didn't have to come all the way to Ahtisaari, it was at the level of the regional director who smoothed it, and then we had regional directors dealing with Ahtisaari. I really think that it worked very well. It helped that Ahtisaari knew the problem inside out and dealt with it for so many years. That helped a lot, to have a boss like that.

JS: I am going to let you go because I know you have to go. Thank you very, very much.

BD: You are welcome.

JS: It is really a unique perspective.

Yale UN-Oral History Project

Hawa Binta Dieye

James Sutterlin, Interviewer

June 23, 1998

New York, New York

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