

United Nations Oral History Project

**Joseph Stephanides
20 April 1998**

Yale-UN Oral History
Joseph Stephanides
James Sutterlin, Interviewer
April 20, 1998,
United Nations, New York

Index: Namibia

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)	30
Charter of the United Nations	2
Civil Police (CIVPOL)	8-9, 11, 14, 21, 23-24, 30-32
Elections	22-23, 25
Farming/farmers	2-6, 9, 14-16, 27, 29, 31
Human rights	1, 28
Illiteracy	20
Mining	2, 26-27
Owambo people	16
Peace-keeping operations	15
South African Army	8
South African Police	7-9, 23, 31
South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO)	7-8, 14, 16-17, 21, 23
Southwest Africa Police (SWAPOL)	21
UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)	13
UN Development Programme (UNDP)	27
UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	25
UN Security Council	7
UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG)	7-9, 11-12, 14, 16-17, 19, 31-32


Dag Hammarskjöld
LIBRARY

Yale-UN Oral History

Joseph Stephanides

Interviewer: James S. Sutterlin

April 20, 1998

United Nations, New York

James S. Sutterlin: So Mr. Stephanides, thank you very much for participating in this oral history that is being conducted by Yale, and in this case with regard to Namibia, and I would like to begin the interview by asking you: What were you doing before you were recruited for the position in Namibia and exactly what was the position that you went to in Namibia?

Joseph Stephanides: Well, it is a pleasure to be able to participate in this important project, Mr. Sutterlin. It is indeed perhaps a good way of graphically presenting to possible researchers and other individuals or organizations, who may be interested in this involvement of the United Nations in that part of the world, with what exactly happened on the ground. So I welcome this and I am very grateful for being given this opportunity. Now as you said, I was selected to be a member of this team. At that time I was the Senior External Relations Officer at the Centre for Science and Technology for Development in the United Nations. Prior to that I had experience in Human Rights. I was the Deputy Chief of the New York Office of the Human Rights Division and well, upon assembling in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, we were told all our specific

functions. I was asked to be the Head of the Kamanjab and Sesfontein districts. There were two districts combined into a single one and Kamanjab and Sesfontein are located in the northwestern part of Namibia. If you are familiar with the map, this is an area where the major economic activities are mostly farming and mining.

JSS: Diamond mining?

JS: Well, not diamond mining, but other precious stones, especially in the areas, close to the skeleton coast.

JSS: And what did you understand to be the functions of this office when you went there?

JS: Well, we all shared, as volunteers, a common yearning and aspiration to help give substance and meaning to the pronouncements in the Charter of the United Nations for providing eligible territories and peoples the means to achieve their precious independence. And so we went there with a sense of commitment and a lot of pride in having that major challenge ahead of us.

JSS: And I believe that some officers were designated as Political Offices. Was this one of the political offices?

JS: Yes, heading a District Centre presupposes certain experience in political affairs and of course managerial responsibilities experience. Mr. Ahtisaari and his senior colleagues in putting together the team took all these factors into consideration when they decided to select the teams.

JSS: And what preparation did you have before going there? They had some training later on, I think, but you were there. When did you get there by the way?

JS: Well, I arrived, if I recall correctly, at the beginning of April, 1989. And we were assembled in Windhoek for briefings and I must say, prior to that we had benefited from very intensive briefings in terms of what is expected of us, familiarization with the living conditions there and also with the particular characteristics of the terrain where we would be operating.

JSS: And how did you understand the functions of the office of the Division Headquarters where you were?

JS: Yes, well, that's a good question. Every district had its own special features. In my case the district for which I had responsibility was merely a farming area with hundreds of huge farms operated and owned by white farmers and with the labor provided by people from the townships. Every farm had to draw on the resources of townships in terms of labor. The white farmers themselves would have their own depots, and one of them was in Kamanjab, where I was based, a little town with all the essentials

to supply the farmers who would be coming quite a distance, either daily or twice a week or three times a week to get supplies. Then attached to those buildings belonging to the farmers there was also the township of the African Namibians who were all more or less relying on whatever employment they could get from the farmers. And the conditions? I was very appalled, to build on your question, I was very appalled and so were all my colleagues from the living conditions in the townships. I vividly recall, and I have pictures to that effect, their dwellings constructed of empty cans of Coca Cola and other metal kind of tins. And it was unbearably hot in the strong sun of Namibia. And that was the only means they could find to erect a kind of dwelling, over and above the usual huts that they had traditionally relied upon, provided of course by the natural resources around them.



UNITED NATIONS

JSS: And what were the functions of your office? You had contact with all elements in Namibian society? And for what purpose?

Dag Hammarskjöld
LIBRARY

JS: Yes, that's a very good question. Our first objective upon arriving was to reassure everybody, to reassure the white farmers that they would end up benefiting by allowing the implementation of the agreement to be smoothly proceeded with and to reassure the often disillusioned and disappointed African majority that this time it's going to work, that indeed we have the ability and the determination to see it through. So we had the first objective to reassure those two major constituents. We also had to establish a good working relationship with the South African authorities who were still in control of the administration and above all to establish our ability to function.

JSS: Well, how did you do this? How did you reassure the people? How did you get in contact with them? What was your means of communication?

JS: By frequent, I will emphasize, very frequent meetings with all aspects of Namibian society. We used to spend considerable time in the townships playing soccer with youngsters and in the afternoon talking to the elders about our mandate, distributing material which was provided to us in the language spoken, and above all answering as many questions as we could. We had the ability to bring with us the special help of locally recruited staff, who had the needs and the wishes of the people very much close to their heart; they were able to guide us in what exactly was expected of us, in terms of enlightening them. What kind of questions the people would like to be answered. What kind of clarifications. So that was one aspect. Then on the other side, with the white farmers, we used to pay visits to the farms, we identified all the farms and we visited them, not only once, not twice, but perhaps tens of time in terms of reassuring them, talking to them, benefiting on most occasions from very generous hospitality from them and also talking to their workers and we insisted always on talking to the workers without the presence of the farmer, in a way that was reassuring to them as far as confidentiality was concerned. I must tell you I was struck and so were many of my colleagues in other districts by the hesitancy of the people to accept that indeed the vote they were about to cast would indeed be secret. They were totally obsessed with the notion that there would be no secrecy that the farmers were supreme and were in a position to know everything, they would find out and punish them.

JSS: Did they know what the United Nations was? Or did you have to educate them on that?

JS: Well, most of them had an appreciation that the United Nations was an organization which was dedicated to decolonization; they had heard about it, but they were always more aware of our limitations than our capacity to help them. That was the legacy. That was the difficult legacy against which we were operating when we landed in Namibia.

JSS: Did you feel at all that you were in a kind of competitive relationship with the South African authorities that were still there? Or were your relations with them good? How did that work?

JS: Obviously at the beginning, and that I must say I can only speak of the middle level South African authorities, those whom I encountered in my day to day work, they were very reluctant at the beginning to share with us, either information in terms of police patrols, in terms of activities by farmers relating to the electoral registration and later on to the election, in terms of results or investigations. They would be very perfunctory in reporting back to us. But as the time passed, especially after the successful dealing with the initial difficulties from alleged incursions in the Northern part of Namibia, the South African Government had decided obviously, at least it was obvious to me, to let this agreement stand, be fully tested through a process of good cooperation on their part. So I

must say that the net result had been one of good cooperation on their part. They had really contributed to the success of the operation. They certainly had the capacity to create chaos and they didn't.

JSS: You mentioned the incursion. Was the SWAPO incursion from Angola, was that evident in your district or not?

JS: Well, there was one other regional headquarters on top of me, before reaching the border. That was the regional division based in Opuvo and of course the other regional division based in Ovamboland. As far as I can say, there was no hesitation on the part of the Head of UNTAG at that time, Mr. Ahtisaari, to act swiftly and determinedly in reporting to the Security Council through the Secretary-General on the situation and seeking and obtaining authorization to exclude certain elements of the South African police forces from the obligation of confinement, in order to reassure the South Africans as to our impartiality and even-handedness. That had worked.

JSS: Was that before you got there?

JS: Yes, it was early in March, and that was well before we arrived there. And barely Mr. Ahtisaari had landed, as you know he arrived, I believe on the 31st of March, this incident almost happened immediately or a few days after he arrived there. So that was dealt with quite effectively, both by the UN, by the Secretary-General and the Security Council.

JSS: I have read that a number of the people who came from the North, more or less stayed, and then were searched out by the South African police. Were you aware of any of the SWAPO infiltrates who had stayed in the area?

JS: Not in our area. One of the successes of UNTAG was to convince the majority population, the people of Namibia, to transcend the tribal factor and the success of that was obvious only one or two years after independence had been completed. Then we can say with certainty that that was something that was achieved. However, when UNTAG arrived in Namibia, tribal politics were very important and SWAPO's great strength was Ovamboland. The area where I was stationed, in Kamanjab and Sesfontein was inhabited by Damaras, which was a different tribe. It doesn't mean to suggest that Damaras did not participate in the struggle of SWAPO, yes they did. The Foreign Minister of Namibia, Mr. Theo Ben Gurirab, was a leading participant in that struggle.

JSS: Tell me about the relationship with the special police force that was the main security factor in Namibia after the South African army was put into a garrison. What was your relation with them and also with CivPol. Was that attached to your office? Did they have a separate office? How did that work?

JS: Yes, indeed, in my office we had two political officers and a detachment of five, later on became seven or nine, civilian police detail. I remember the original team were Bangladeshi police, later on as the operation progressed we were joined by six Royal

mounted police from Canada. Their role was to liaise on a daily basis and to have joint patrols with the South African police. Notwithstanding initial difficulties that objective had been achieved. In the end the professional relationship of the two had been quite good and notwithstanding the difficulties arising from the need to investigate as soon as possible, the various allegations of discriminatory treatment or other violations of the agreement. This had always been testing this relationship because we always wanted the investigation to finish earlier than they did, still I think their relations were quite professional.

JSS: How did you find the quality of the civilian police who came for UNTAG, from Bangladesh, from Canada? Did they adjust rapidly to the requirements of Namibia?

JS: Yes, given a certain time for adjustment I will unquestionably say yes. They also partook of the same kind of sense of pride that we all had. They identified, they were probably briefed by their own governments as to the importance and sensitivity of the operation and I think notwithstanding certain logistical shortcomings that they had, they were able to make a very important contribution to the objective of this Operation. I must say that the role of civilian police in areas such as the farming areas was doubly important, because of the great distances that they had to cover.

JSS: In that connection let me ask you another question. Obviously your relations with the local population were very important as was that of CivPol. Was language a problem at all? How did you manage communications?

JS: Well, I was very impressed that a lot of people in Namibia spoke English. Certainly, they had no problem, and then those with whom I couldn't speak in English I was certainly able to speak in German, because some of them were able to speak German. As you know, Namibia had been a German colony. We always had of course interpreters, assisting us, for those who were not able to speak either of those two languages.

JSS: And those were the local employees, right?



UNITED NATIONS

JS: Yes, right.

JSS: Now you mentioned logistics. What were the communication facilities, for example, that you enjoyed there in this rather small township?

Dag Hammarskjöld
LIBRARY

JS: That is a very good question. In a country as vast as Namibia is, it was totally, I would say, impossible to communicate without the help of VHS, whatever they call this high frequency wireless. There was no other way, because the local telephone communications were, I would say, not the most sophisticated and so, for example, going from Kamanjab to Seisfontein which we had to do at least once a week, it was a big distance, gravel road with all kinds of difficult hilly and mountainous terrain. It was important to rely on this kind of high frequency communications. There was no other way to communicate. And also in terms of other communications with Verta, for

example, which was one outpost for which we had responsibility and it was manned by, and I didn't mention it in the beginning, by an Austrian civilian police contingent, that was in permanent placement there under our responsibility. And that was on the Opuwo road. The Opuwo is a very remote area inhabited by the Ovahimbas. The Ovahimbas are a proud people and the Opuwo road is very strategic, because this is the only road passing through mountainous terrain, and there is no way you can come from Angola without passing by this Opuwo road. So the Verta checking point was guarding against infiltration from the North. It was a necessary guarantee that the United Nations had given the South Africans, that there would be monitoring, that no infiltration will continue once they had demobilized their own forces. So all communications were by VHS communications. There were no telephones there. Simply there was nothing, there was no habitation. It was just an outpost.

JSS: And how about radio? I judge radio was very important in getting word through to the local population. Did any of that originate with your headquarters or did all that come from Windhoek?

JS: That was a great program worked out by our colleagues at Headquarters in Windhoek. It was staffed by professional staff with specialized expertise in mass media, communications. I recall that I was called to give an interview which I did during the electoral campaign, on our experience in our region. So they had used inputs from the people of the ground in order to document the kind of work that UNTAG was doing in this area. Certainly the local language programs were very important because they were

listened to by all inhabitants of the area, guiding them with regard to the procedure of the vote and reassuring them on the secrecy of the vote and explaining also the potential benefits from the implementation of UNTAG's mandate. This was an instrumental part of the overall strategy.

JS: And almost everybody had radios?

JS: Yes, I would say that all townships had radios, I would not say televisions, but definitely radios, yes.

JSS: Now, were there other UN organizations in the region, in the area, other NGOs active there? And if so what was the relationship among all the groups?

JS: I cannot say in my district that there were many NGOs, except to say that many NGOs had preceded us, that I remember vividly that the people were telling me that before that agreement it was only some NGOs who could've visited the region and had taken particular interest in the needs of the people but I cannot make reference to any particular one, because as I said during my presence there it was already in the context of implementing that agreement and so there was no role for NGOs in that particular area. I know that the OAU had sent repeatedly delegations to review the arrangements and to report back to their constituents. That is something I recall and I also remember other organizations and parliamentaries from many countries visiting to take stock of how things were developing.

JSS: And what was the chain of command? Whom did you report to?

JS: Yes, that was also very well devised. Every district was reporting to a Regional Director. The structure was as follows: we had the Head of the Operation, Mr. Ahtisaari, and under him were, at the periphery, the various regional directors, and we had quite a few of them, with regional headquarters. In my case the regional director was Mr. Ebfima Jobarte, who was based in Outjo and I was reporting to him, and he was reporting to Ahtisaari. Another District Centre in the region of Mr. Jobarte was based in Khorixas, it was headed by my colleague Tony Lydon who was an official of UNCTAD in Geneva. And another was in Arandis. Originally, as I said, there was supposed to be four districts, but then in the end it was decided that we combine Seifontein and Kamanjab districts into a single one. Another regional headquarters was in Otzivarongo, which was headed by my colleague Mr. Ismat Steiner. He's now Director in the Legal Department, and another one was in Tsumeb, it was headed by Keith Beyan from DPI. Then there was one in Oshakoti, that is Owamboland. There was another one in Swakomund, one in Luteritz, one in Mariantal, Gobabis, Tsumke, Rundu. So that was the structure.

JSS: And what did you report?

JS: Well, that's interesting. It had the elements of good diligent reporting of a diplomatic office, namely you had to separate your weekly report into three sections. One section, political developments, pertaining to the implementation of the Accord,

second one was on civic activities, popularization and selling the mission and making people more aware of the details, and the third was the reaction to be given by the civilian police on their activities, investigations, and other activities. So that was the structure. And it would be, of course, important for me and my colleagues, I believe all colleagues in that area, to attend as many rallies as possible; to speak to as many rallies as possible; to attend as many professional meetings with farmers and others and report on this: what kind of questions were asked, what answers we gave, how reassuring we had been and also what misgivings we had.

JSS: Did you ever try to facilitate relationship between the black African population and, sometimes called, the settlers, the whites?

JS: Yes, that I must say, that was an important, a very important chapter in my experience. It was before we had proceeded to our districts. We were all staying for a couple of months, till June or July in Outjo, the Regional Headquarters. During that time, there were a lot of grievances, a lot of misgivings on the part of the farmers to accept the role of UNTAG, and, above all, to accept its impartiality. They would accuse UNTAC, that we had a hidden agenda, that we had no intention of being impartial and that we had in mind a pre-arranged outcome of surrendering them to SWAPO, who would then seek their expulsion from Namibia. That was their concern and it was very widely felt and it was nourished by the constant barrage of propaganda by certain extremist elements within the community, people who were really receiving their guidance from dark corners in South Africa itself, from the ultra right-wing extremists.

One day, and I will never forget that experience, I received a call that was very difficult to communicate on the phone. I was in Kamanjab, and I got word very early in the morning that my mother was seriously ill and I had to rush to Cyprus. By the time I arrived in Cyprus, I remember it was a Monday, when I got this news, I arrived there only on Wednesday morning and unfortunately my mother had passed away. I felt very bad, and it was only reconfirmation that we were cut off from modern communications. But then during that time that I spent in Cyprus I received news, sent to me through the UN peacekeeping operation in Cyprus, that the Headquarters of our Office in Outjo had been bombed by those extremist elements. A Namibian guard of the Office died in the attack. And that was done by extremist elements, and that I believe exemplified the kind of mistrust we had to overcome. Attacking the UN presence there, it was only a confirmation that we had a lot of work to do to reassure these people.

JSS: Did you identify any such extremist elements in the district where you were?

JS: Well, we knew of the existence of extremist elements. We knew from other farmers; as their confidence was building up through daily contacts and reassuring remarks on our part, farmers and others would be a little more talkative and describe the kind of splits they had. And we knew that the people who didn't get in touch with us, who avoided responding to our calls for meetings, they were confirming that they did not believe in the UN. As a matter of fact, well before the process was over some of these people had already emigrated. They left Namibia for South Africa. But in the end, the

surprising news was that some of these very conservative and negative elements had ex-post-facto recognized UNTAG's role.

JSS: Did you perceive in this context that the SWAPO leadership was popular there and well known?

JS: Absolutely, there was no question that SWAPO had captivated the hearts and minds of the Namibian people and that their support transcended by far tribal lines. There was some element of resentment among the leading members, the chiefs of the various tribes, about the fact that the Owambo people were predominant and that they may be taking over to their exclusion. But again, this concern has been met post independence. Because, as you can see, the government that was put in place was quite representative.

JSS: But you could see from the beginning that Nujoma was a popular figure?

JS: Absolutely. I think he was of course extremely popular among the Owambo people, but he was enjoying an equal amount of support, definitely, comfortable majority support among the other segments of the Namibian people, although in one or two areas one of the opposition parties (DTA) which was also supported by the white farmers was in the majority.

JSS: What would you, how would you assess the level of political sophistication of the population there? Did they know what democracy meant?

JS: They knew what was happening to them was not fair. I think they were also reassured as to the moral strength of their argument and heartened by the struggle initiated by SWAPO. So it was not the case of people totally resigned to their fate, they did have the determination to struggle to secure justice and freedom.

JSS: During this period, who had the most influence on the population? Did the South African administrator, in their view, was he the controlling element in the area? Or was it you and the other UN people there who was really influencing the attitudes of the people?

JS: As the work of UNTAG was progressing, the influence and role of the South African Governor-General was diminishing. I would say, yes, at the beginning it was stronger, and by the time we reached the election date and especially after the election it was clear that the authority rested with, especially the moral authority, with UNTAG and it was so represented. And again, as I indicated to you, history has shown that the government of South Africa, notwithstanding its racist and other policies, being in contempt of so many resolutions had, indeed, despite all that, decided – for its own reasons, I believe – to let this accord be implemented. I believe they have made a conscious policy decision to cooperate in implementation of this accord. And I think this historic truth should be said.

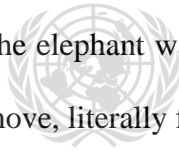
JSS: Joseph, there were a lot of people like you who went out to Namibia from Headquarters in New York or Geneva into a totally new environment and in many cases into a totally different world. What were the living conditions like? How would you describe the requirements for acclimatization so to speak to these different circumstances?

JS: Well, I heard many times people telling me that once you're exposed to an African scenery, you become captivated by it and you always want to go back, and you become fascinated and nostalgic. I can confirm this is true. I do not know if it was only because of the uniqueness of Namibia, that vast territory with unspoiled habitat and its beauty but also the kindness of its people. I have only good feelings to recall. The feelings that you had when you encountered people that were desperate. Who had nobody else to reach out to them before we arrived there. All these come back to mind and I think it has been a very enriching, a very fulfilling experience and that I must say has been shared by all my colleagues, whenever we talk, other Namibian veterans, everybody speaks quite fondly of that engagement.

JSS: How did you live there?

JS: I had rather comfortable arrangements in Outjo. We were staying in a small hotel and we had very good facilities, even telephone communications were better, we could speak once a week with our families. It was not as comfortable when I moved to Kamanjab, because there were no facilities there. But you learn to make a hundred and

fifty miles as just a matter of routine. I would drive back to Outjo two times or at least once a week, get supplies, meet with U.N. colleagues there, relax and then go back. I read a lot of books, I spent a lot of time getting to know nature. I remember, once I was invited by a Scottish couple who ran a safari park several miles out of Kamanjab. They invited me to their farm in order to speak to their workers on the role of UNTAG, which was routine, but also to stay for dinner. And it so happened that we were receiving on the next day a delegation from Windhoek and I explained to my hosts that I would have to return to Kamanjab before the sun set. Around sunset, just as it was getting a little dark, I started with my four-by-four to go back when I saw in the middle of the track, not road, just a track, a huge elephant, and the elephant was almost occupying the whole width of the track. That animal would not move, literally for ten fifteen minutes, what do I do?



UNITED NATIONS

End of Tape 1

Dag Hammarskjöld

LIBRARY

JSS: That sounds like a fascinating experience. And healthwise, were there any particular problems for the people coming out there?

JS: Yes, I must tell you that we had a lot of instances of malaria. We were told in the beginning to take medication against malaria. But it became clear that we could not sustain this kind of treatment for more than a month or two basically because the medicine had a lot of side effects. So we all decided to do away with it. We benefited from the fact that our area during the dry season was not as endemic as the north is, for example. With some very small exceptions I think it worked well for us. We had also

some unfortunate experiences with many accidents, because of the roads, people were not very experienced in driving in this kind of jungle conditions. Some colleagues lost their lives, not in my district but in other districts. But as far as living conditions were concerned, I would say that Namibia had a good basic structure both in terms of the health sector and in terms of the food sector. There was plenty of food, meat and vegetables and fruits, and there were good clinics. We had our own clinic, staffed by the Swiss, in Windhoek. We'd go there once a month for meetings and we would always go and get needed medical supplies. But also the South Africans had their own clinics in every little place. And we could use them, there was no problem.



UNITED NATIONS

JSS: So there were doctors available?

JS: Yes.

Dag Hammarskjöld

JSS: I asked earlier about communication. I wanted to ask, to what extent was illiteracy prevalent in the area where you were?

JS: That was a major issue. I think the vast majority of the elderly people were illiterate. It is true that the schools that we visited, and we visited practically all schools in the district, were crowded with youngsters. That was very healthy, certainly. But I cannot speak of those who were in their forties and above; they were all, in the vast majority, illiterate. So it suggested a trend that there was a pattern for schooling and some emphasis; whether that was associated with the teachings and preachings of

SWAPO or whether it was a result of a late decision of the South African administration to provide for better schooling, I do not know. But I believe it must have something to do with the emphasis that SWAPO, as a liberation movement, had given to proper education. It's a way to counteract oppression and domination.

JSS: Now, one of the problems that was frequently brought to the attention of headquarters here in New York was that of the so-called Koevoet people who had been in SWAPOL, I think, at one point. Were you aware of their activities in your district?

JS: Well, we heard about them; we had received briefings. That was one of the areas we had to watch but I cannot, myself, say that I had come across any of these fellows. I remember also the demoralizing effect or terrorizing effect that those armored personnel carriers had on ordinary Namibians. I don't remember the name now; they were typically South African, heavy armored personnel carriers. And according to the agreements that had been made with South Africa, they had to be confined to barracks. And that had been observed. The civilian police would visit them and confirm that they were confined. And later they had been withdrawn, well before the electoral campaign started.

JSS: So that was not really a problem?

JS: No, that was not a problem. I'm aware of this having been a problem in other areas, for example Ovamboland, but not in our district.

JSS: Now, what was the role of your office, and your own role in preparing for the elections?

JS: Right, that's another chapter. As we said, the first phase was familiarization, the second phase was to educate to the extent possible the people, to gain their confidence on both sides of the argument, to establish a good working relationship with the South African authorities, and then to go to the electoral campaign. We needed to be trained in the particulars of the electoral law. I was given responsibility for this electoral function for the whole of the region. We had to visit all the areas where there would be registration so as to arrange for the registration of all eligible voters. So we needed to get them out to come on that particular date; so we would send local people to alert them on dates they had to be assembled so that we can explain to them the process and to register them so as to be eligible to vote. Then once that was done, the registration period was over, and that took a lot of effort.

JSS: Was the registration done in your office?

JS: No, the registration was done in pre-designated areas. I remember one registration happening under a huge tree in the middle of the wilderness, huge tree, we erected a tent and they would come from all areas you know, squads of people coming from the farms. So all this was done, based on good information that was gathered, in the preceding phase. When we visited all farms we knew where people were located. Then we used also elements, information from the local townships on voters in the farms. I

remember then writing that we achieved perhaps over ninety percent registration of all eligible voters. That is my recollection, I hope I am not wrong. Then once the registration had been completed, it had to be certified that it was done. The results were sent to Headquarters in Windhoek and then the electoral campaign started. And we had to monitor the rallies so there would be freedom of expression; reassure everybody as to the secrecy of the vote; urge them to be on time, and on Election Day to vote.

JSS: How did you monitor the rallies?

JS: We used to go there with our UN hats and arm bands and stand by conspicuously, and be present there to hear what was being said. I also remember attending a SWAPO rally in Otsivarongo when Mr. Nujoma came there and I sat there and we listened to his speech. So that was part of monitoring the conduct of those rallies. And I must say there were never major incidents – only minor skirmishes between rivals, and then civilian police would deal with that together with the South African police.

JSS: And then you were saying the preparations for the elections. When the elections were actually held, again what was your role there? How did you handle that?

JS: When the election was held, I had a very crucial role to play. I had to go from place to place to certify, based on actual observation on how the electoral polling was conducted. While the South African authorities were conducting the election, we were supervising. So that was the crucial element. We were in control. We were supervising

to make sure that the election was free and fair. And then I remember working out a good working relationship with the South African authorities in terms of looking for pragmatic solutions to deal with the distance problems. So flexibility was important, we would decide with their agreement to extend the deadline to enable some other people who we were told at the last moment were on their way and because of the distance had not made it to the polling station on time. There was flexibility and great satisfaction that there was very wide voter participation. That people had ventured out and voted.

JSS: And did you have additional personnel coming from the UN to help out in the monitoring of the election?



JS: Indeed, thirty days before the election additional teams had come and our numbers were doubled so as to be able to have a monitor in each and every balloting office, so they were all volunteers. They were very enthusiastic people. I was impressed by their motivation, their zeal, their interest to make up for not being there much to their regret the whole time; to learn as much as possible, and to enjoy this great lesson in democracy. So the balloting was completed, then comes the counting which was in our presence and in the presence also of the various political parties, all in one room counting. Then they were certified and then counter-certified by us. The South Africans put their seals, we put our seals and then they were taken into the police station or another area and they were under guard, including the presence of UN civilian police. And then they were carried by plane to Windhoek, where the electoral results were announced. That was the completion. Once the election was completed and certified as free and fair, I

left. It was just before Christmas that I returned to NY. Some other colleagues stayed until the installation of the new government, which was in April, as you know. But that was the completion of a very important chapter in my UN career. I enjoyed that, it was a concrete contribution to something bigger and something that the Organization was really well suited to contribute to.

JSS: What was your most memorable experience, aside from the elephant in the middle of the road, as the UN representative there?

JS: Well, my most memorable experience in this, I'm saying this to you in all humility, but I didn't know, neither did I ever focus before, on promoting tolerance and better understanding among diametrically opposed and seemingly intractable positions. I never would have thought it would have been possible for those positions to be reconciled. But having witnessed that, I would say that is the biggest, both eye-opener and happy surprise that has come out of this Namibian experience. The fact that these seemingly intractable positions have been reconciled.

JSS: Before the elections, a large number of refugees were transported back to Namibia, mostly from Angola. Did any of these refugees come into the district you were in? And what was the effect of that?

JS: Yes, they came and they had been under the responsibility of the UNHCR representatives who worked closely with us and we knew from the list that they had

provided that so many had come into our region and so many into another region and so on and so forth. Most of them, however, chose to be registered and stay in Windhoek during that time. Very few had come to the periphery. Others were, as you know, demobilized and chose also to remain in areas around Windhoek, or in Owamboland.

JSS: So you did not have many demobilized personnel there?

JS: No, not in our area.

JSS: Was this area a relatively prosperous area of Namibia?

JS: Well, I cannot call it prosperous because it was all subsistence level. What they had was the means to survive. I can only tell you of five maximum six farms owned by black people. I know now there are many. I know at that time because we used to visit them. Very poor soil and very limited resources.

JSS: And the mining? Who was doing the mining?

JS: The mining was all in the hands of big corporations of South Africa and de Beers. One of my most relaxing moments is when we decided once to go by road from Kamanjab with a colleague of mine, Mr. Lars Skoeld from Sweden, to cross all the way the desert and reach the ocean. I remember the cool air from the ocean, mind you the water was sub-freezing, it was unbelievably cold, we couldn't swim, and then we walked

along the skeleton coast. There you could see on the surface semi-precious stones, little pieces here and there, of course... that is an area that has been fully exploited and now abandoned. I was told that the only remaining diamonds are in the Orangemund area, which is down in the South, in the Namib desert.

JSS: I asked these questions about the economy and social area because I read someplace that there was a responsibility to prepare a kind of report on the economic and social conditions in the various regions and districts in preparation for the UN Development Programme when it would come in to assist. Were you involved in that?

JS: Yes, I remember it now that you mention it. Windhoek had asked for our evaluation, which we did.

JSS: You did that?

JS: Yes, we did it and we had sent it through channels. I believe that was done by all regions. And we said that the first priority was for the people of the area to have better dwellings. The most urgent priority was for the Habitat program to provide decent housing. They had no running water, no electricity, nothing. It was just tins. I wish I could dig out these pictures and give you one picture if you wanted to see, how the housing was, just with these Coca-Cola tins. So they desperately needed decent housing. Also upgrading their educational base was our recommendation. I must add that the means of livelihood for the uneducated could only be found in the farming or mining

areas. But if you were to enlarge the population's share in education then you could get them to do other things, such as replacing the South Africans in the administration. And that was a very important recommendation, upgrading the educational base apart from the housing and health sectors.

JSS: How high did you find the expectations were of the black population?

JS: The youngsters were very ambitious. They were able to go beyond the tribal aspect and see Namibia as a nation. The elderly were more close to their taboos. What was important was our clan, our tribe. And to have the means to live and survive. They were not yet ready to enthusiastically espouse the notion that independence would bring quick results and change. But I must say the youngsters were totally committed to that. And I believe the youngsters were leading the way.

JSS: And there was no cultural rejection of the concepts of democratization as I judge the UN was spreading there?

JS: No, they were totally responsive. They were argumentative in our discussions, they were asking questions and they knew about their rights. As I said, those who asked questions impressed me that they had already been exposed to the virus of democratization, even before we arrived there.

JSS: And they knew something about human rights?

JS: They knew that what was happening to them was not fair and they were also hopeful, although not always convinced, that the UN presence there would make a difference.

JSS: And going to the other side, what about the white farmers? Were they looking to the future with any hope?

JSS: The best way I can present, I hope accurately, their point of view is that their greatest apprehension was that we had an over-simplified view of their role and their presence in Namibia. We were oblivious to the fact that their great ancestors were born there, that they care about that land, that they had toiled and they had nurtured the farms from scratch. They had been there when their black workers, as they called them, needed them most and they would always attend to them and had no animosity or racial superiority syndrome. That was, I would say, the average farmer's viewpoint. Of course, there were also the “machos” who could not be engaged because they were totally unresponsive to the message of the UN. Now, at the same time, again, as accurately as I can present their point of view, they were not convinced that the UN had the capacity to deliver the kind of things that we had been telling them in terms of stability to follow independence. They were of the view that we were only there as part of a sell-out project and that the South Africans decided to abandon them and that it would be the end and they would have to look for a country to take them, and so on and so forth. But now I am very proud to say that even those who remained skeptical at the time have since gotten

the positive affirmation – the affirmation that indeed the UN was able to deliver a better future for all Namibians.

JSS: So the last question I am going to ask you is, could you describe what might be a typical day in your life there in that rather remote outpost. What was it like? What did you do? How would the day have gone?

JS: That's a good question to help me recollect. Yes, I would always wake up early, you cannot sleep because it is very hot during the day. Always when I rose, I would go to the office, which was a two-minute walk. There was always civilian police present at the office.



UNITED NATIONS

JSS: Was there any air conditioning?

Dag Hammarskjöld

LIBRARY

JS: We didn't have air conditioning, but we had what I call an indigenous cooling machine called "cooler" which was a huge, monstrous kind of unit which had a big tank of water and then there was a fan that caused the water to cool the air. If you closed your windows it had an effect, because the climate was dry, not humid. So it had an effect.

So we would check to see if there were any news, any cables. That was a good thing to familiarize ourselves with, we listened to the BBC and then you would like to be mobile, you would have to fill your day. That is what the mission was about, that is what a field assignment is. So you ask your civilian police, what are your plans today? They tell you the plans, if you find them attractive you join them. You go to see some farms

you haven't seen or you go to Sesfontein, that means you have to stay over night there and come back the next day. Or if there were interesting news at Outjo, the Regional Headquarters, you go to Outjo, or if there was a rally you attend the rally. That was our routine, but most of the time, I remember was consumed in trying to deal with problems that would come to your office, in terms of some little cases, some concerns, complaints, either from the farmers or from local people whom you had to help and see what you can do to resolve their problems.

JSS: Would they come to the office?

JS: Yes, at the beginning they were very afraid, but then later on they would come very often, sit in our office and dramatize their grievances and then what we have to do is call the South African police officer-in-charge in the station and say this is the case and we would be most grateful if Inspector so and so from the civilian police could come to see us and discuss the matter and see what could be done about it. You could not force them to act, and that was one of our limitations. I also liked to go with them sometimes, with the South African police, in our own car of course, and the police in their own car, we never shared a car, that was the understanding Headquarters gave us and we'd go together to visit some areas where concerns were expressed. Now one thing that I must tell you, I think I should tell you this story. It is very important. One day, that was towards the end of our mission, a lady who had many years to surface in that township, in Kamanjab, came to see me, she was assisted by two youngsters who had been more or less in constant contact with us. She said she needed the help of UNTAG. And what was the

kind of help she wanted? She said she hadn't seen her husband for seven years and she wanted to see her husband. And where was her husband? He was in a farm hundreds of miles away in another region and the farmer there did not allow him to come and visit his wife. These are some of the most difficult cases in Namibia, because you never know if a man wants to visit his wife and the farmer does not allow him. And true, after a while it was found out that indeed this man had been prevented from leaving the farm and thanks to our efforts he was able to rejoin his wife. It was all arranged by the Nigerian civilian police. So you see that UNTAG became a positive factor in the daily lives of Namibian families.

Looking for the concrete, over and above the abstract, was the most important priority and that typifies, if I may say in conclusion Jim, typifies and exemplifies the value and premium of a field mission. I always say to my younger colleagues that they should look forward to volunteering with the first opportunity for a mission assignment, because it makes the UN service more concrete, more understandable and also provides an opportunity to put into practice what we have been nurturing through our own work here at Headquarters in terms of values, in terms of principles, in terms of ideas the UN stands for.

JSS: And the morale generally speaking among the UN personnel was very good in Namibia, wasn't it?

JS: It was extremely high. If I may say so, the morale was boosted by the daily awareness that the operation was succeeding. Because it was clearly set in stages, you knew what you had succeeded in establishing, you knew that you had established a good modus operandi with the South African authorities. You knew that you were able to register the people, and proceed with the election. So it was clearly codified.

JSS: And you had a sense that the operation was being well managed?

JS: Absolutely, that was an effectively-led operation. We have to pay tribute here to all those senior officers in the Secretariat, starting from the UN Secretary-General Mr. Perez de Cuellar, to Mr. Ahtisaari, the Head of that operation and all his senior colleagues. And if I may say something which is not to be taken as an attempt at flattery... there was a young, articulate and ambitious head of personnel at that time. That's when I met Kofi Annan, he was the head of personnel. He went out of his way to insist that the teams be selected carefully and with a good methodological kind of approach towards structuring the whole operation. He was insisting at the meetings we had that if you do not establish the team now and wait to do that late, it will be too late and events will overrun us. And he insisted in not phasing in the operation before all the teams had been established in Windhoek. That is the kind of contribution Kofi Anan made as head of personnel at that time. He visited Namibia repeatedly and he visited my area and I was very much impressed by his interest and his commitment to the implementation of the Accord.

JSS: So a real success?

JS: A real success, and I think a success to all the members of the United Nations who have allowed that operation to develop in such a harmonious way.



UNITED NATIONS

Dag Hammarskjöld
LIBRARY

Yale-UN Oral History Project

Joseph Stephanides
James Sutterlin, interviewer
April 20, 1998,
United Nations, New York

Name Index: Namibia

Ahtisaari, Maarti	3, 7, 13, 33
Annan, Kofi	34
Bevan, Feith	13
Gurirab, Theo-Ben	8
Jobarte, Ebrima	13
Lyndon, Tony	13
Nujoma, Sam	23
Skoeld, Lars	27
Steiner, Ismat	13



UNITED NATIONS

Dag Hammarskjöld
LIBRARY