

Independence for Namibia

Namibia... for the first time in 41 years the government has surrendered territory by negotiating with the international community. What prompted this departure and what are the implications for Southern Africa?

PETER VALE, Research Professor and Director of the Institute for Social and Economic Research at Rhodes University, responds to these issues in this interview.

QUESTION: What prompted the South African government to reconsider its options in Namibia?

PV: It is helpful to begin in the air because the inability of the SADF to match what their opponents could put into aerial combat put Namibia back on the track towards its independence as outlined 10 years ago in United Nations Security Council Resolution 435.

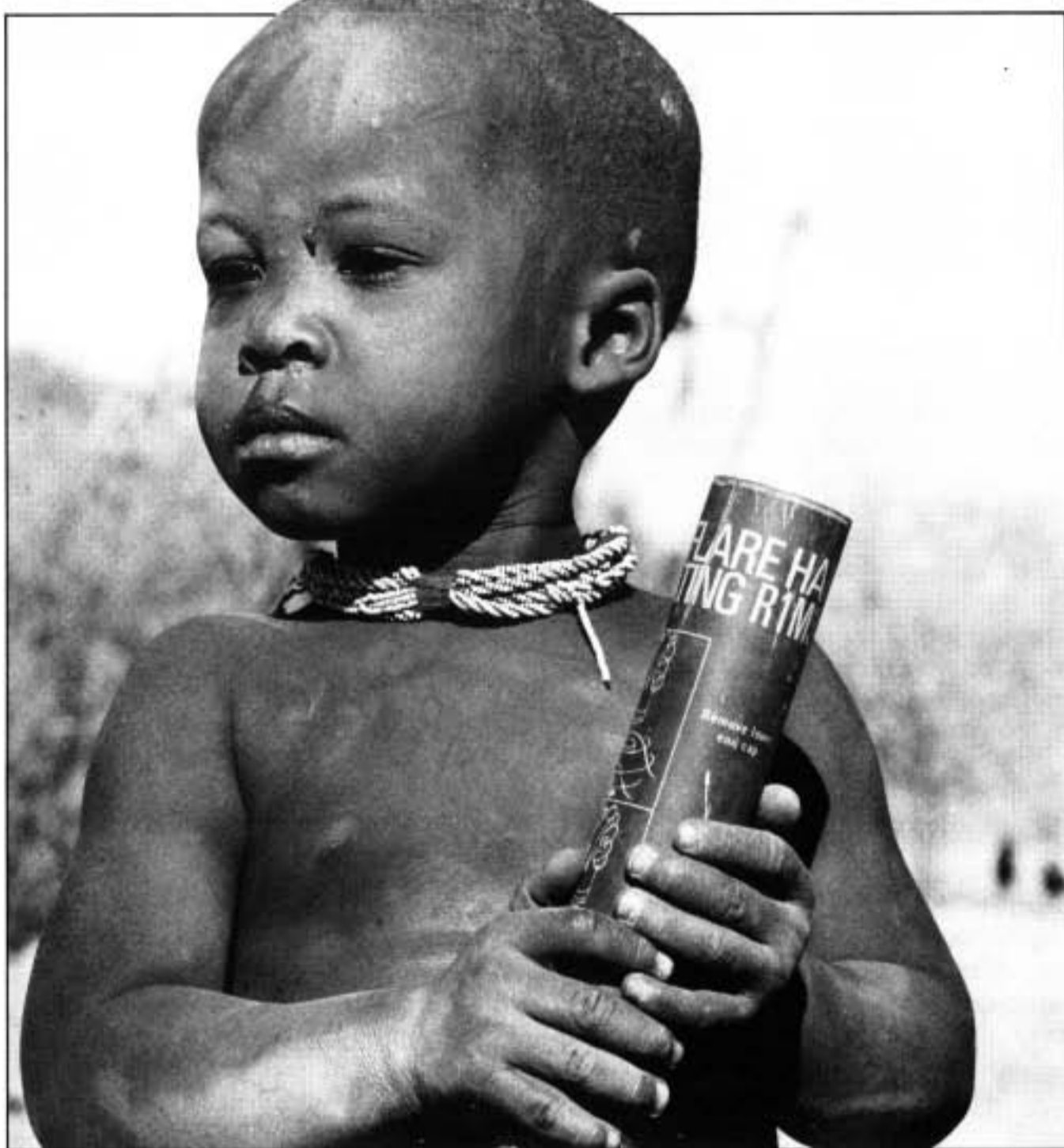
The resulting setback at Cuito-Cuanavale set in train a process which was unthinkable 12 months ago: Pretoria's willingness to abandon its 70-year grip on the contested territory known — only in South Africa — as South West Africa.

Costs, too, played a role: especially given that the joint Cuban-Soviet forces were able to counter South Africa's traditional hold on regional affairs. The sheer expense — both in resources and in manpower — of reversing this was simply too much for Pretoria.

The battle for Cuito-Cuanavale should be seen as the failure of a wide strategic game, even if it was not a reversal in the sense of a defeat on the ground, as General Magnus Malan has claimed. History is replete with examples of well-equipped, well-motivated armies which have failed because generals or, more correctly, the politicians behind them, were unsure of a strategic objective.

South Africa's goals in Angola were vague and, over time, untenable. They relied for their acceptability on the tacit compliance of the Reagan Administration through its own sympathy and support for Dr Jonas Savimbi's Unita movement. While this particular mesh was tolerable, Washington began to question the desirability and efficacy of supporting Unita when it became obvious that South Africa — not the Soviet Union or the Cubans — was the source of regional instability.

On top of these considerations, the post-1945 truism that invading armies lose the battle in their own bedrooms



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played an immediate role in concentrating the official mind. Just two examples illustrate the point. *Insig*, the Nasionale Pers monthly news magazine, carried a remarkable cover on its August 1988 edition. In descending order three banners announced: "Die oorlog in Angola"; "Kenners oor Soldatesres"; "Raak SA Bankrot?"

The cover picture, however, left no illusions about the seriousness of these issues. It showed the near-nude blood-stained body of a wounded white cradled re were questioning the wisdom of, the Border War. This was underscored by the government's banning of the End Conscription Campaign after they had staged a number of high-profile pubin an army-issue groundsheet. In the near corner was an army boot; only two visible hands clasped the cradle: one white, the other black.

The second example was even closer to the bone: *Die Kerkbode*, official mouthpiece of the Dutch Reformed Church, asked "whether South Africa would not be acting morally and ethically to withdraw completely her troops from Angola?"

Although patently not closely akin to

America's Vietnam experience, sections of white public opinion had turned against, and molic meetings on the Angolan/Namibian situation.

With all this, South Africa's game plan faltered: a settlement in "south-western Africa" followed.

QUESTION: Will the political and economic equation in Southern Africa be changed by the independence of Namibia?

PV: Whatever the arithmetical mix after the election, Swapo will govern Namibia. Given the organisation's roots and the long years of patronage which they have enjoyed from the frontline states, there is little doubt that Namibia will become a fully-fledged member of this grouping of states.

Two particular draglines make Namibia's frontline goals even more difficult than other states in the region. First, it is more closely integrated into South Africa than any other Southern African state. Any attempt to sever the economic links between South Africa and Namibia will be like trying to separate, say, Natal from the rest of the country.

Secondly, because the relationship is so intimate, Namibia is more vulnerable than any other state to Pretoria's direct pressure. Agony is added to this by South Africa's first-hand understanding of that country which is unrivalled in any other decolonisation experience.

The real choice before the new government in Windhoek will be to balance these latter considerations against their instinctive sympathy towards the front-line.

Because it will not be possible to choose, Namibia will become both a formal member of the Southern African Customs Union and a member of the front-line by joining the Southern African Development Co-ordinating Conference. So, with Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, it will officially have a foot in both Southern Africa's two economic camps. Except psychologically, the regional balance should not be seriously disturbed.

QUESTION: What impact will developments north of the Orange River have within South Africa itself?

PV: Like many international developments, those in Namibia have been influenced by — and, in turn, will influence — domestic issues. This is why Namibia's independence needs to be set against a wider canvas.

The decision by Pretoria to abandon its commitments to that country represent the first time in 41 years that the National Party has surrendered territory by negotiating — not with itself or its puppets — but with the international community.

This was partially the result of pressure from the deepening rapprochement between the Superpowers: an event of truly historic significance. The agreement to co-operate over Namibia offers a hint — no more, let me stress — that Washington and Moscow could agree to manage the South African dispute. If consensus can be reached with other major powers — particularly, Britain which has traditional interests in the region — then a negotiated end to *apartheid* itself, may be closer than we dare think.

Do not read into this that peace will come to the country or that the flood-gates of economic prosperity will immediately follow. The negotiated end of *apartheid* may open the way to tackle micro-issues — like the horrific conflict in Pietermaritzburg — or macro-issues — like the important debate on redistribution — which have resulted from *apartheid*'s wanton destruction.

This is why the example effect of Namibia is important and urgent. If things go badly and the peace process under Resolution 435 turns to chalk (or worse), South Africa's own transition looks far more stony whatever the world may decide to do.

Detention: hunger strike jolts public complacency

By MAX COLEMAN

DETENTION without trial is a practice which ranks high on the list of universally condemned human rights violations. In the South African context it is viewed as doubly indefensible on account of its role as one of the main props in the defence of the *apartheid* system against its opponents and detractors.

For over 25 years since its inception in 1963, detention without trial has served to isolate, intimidate, and destroy the leadership of political activism against *apartheid* domination, and in the last

to defend the indefensible; on the state-controlled media we were told of the regrettable necessity of detention without trial brought about by the revolutionary situation which had arisen in 1984. No mention was made of the fact that the practice had existed for some 20 years before that. Nor was any commitment made that when the State of Emergency is finally lifted, detention without trial under the permanent legislation of the Internal Security Act would be scrapped.

To hope for the scrapping of detention



How the **New Nation** saw the dilemma of the Minister of Law and Order, Mr Adriaan Vlok, during the hunger strike.

four years it has been employed on a mass scale to do the same to whole communities and rank-and-file membership of popular organisations dedicated to the demise of *apartheid*.

This arbitrary loss of liberty, independent of the jurisdiction of any court of law, has been experienced by an estimated 75 000 persons over the years, in the name of the security of the state. This huge number is surely indicative, not simply of a handful of dissidents, but of mass opposition to an unjust and untenable system.

However, among the white public at large there has been a growing insensitivity and paralysis to the issue of detention without trial which has even developed into a passive acceptance of its "necessity". But this complacency was recently severely jolted by the forgotten victims of Emergency detention taking their lives into their own hands, and declaring to the world that they were prepared to starve themselves to death rather than accept indefinite internment.

As a result of their courageous action, there is now a greater awareness than at any time since 1963, of the evil meaning and moral unacceptability of detention without trial. Yet the authorities still try

without trial is unrealistic — the hand- maiden of *apartheid* will only die when the parent is no more.

In the meantime, by means of heavy restrictions, the status of detainees is being converted from incarceration within prison walls to incarceration within a web of prohibitions involving almost as much loss of freedom, and at no expense to the state. This device is as old as detention without trial itself, but it is now being advanced to a pitch of perfection that must gladden the hearts of the government's *securocratic* engineers.

The release of all detainees still seems (at the time of writing) an achievable goal since the hunger strike continues in some jails and is only suspended in others. The lifting of the State of Emergency as a way out of this dilemma seems less likely since recent ministerial pronouncements have stated that the "revolutionary climate" is still at too high a level (i.e. popular resistance to *apartheid* policies has not evaporated).

Dr Max Coleman is a founder member of the now restricted Detainees Parents Support Committee and a commissioner of the Human Rights Commission.