

BACKGROUND TO VIOLENCE

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As early as 1947, plans were being formulated to 'improve the living conditions of the location residents' in Windhoek, principal town of the mandate territory of South West Africa. Nothing, however, was done until the Nationalist Party was returned to power by South Africa's white electorate in 1953. In 1954, the administration of Africans in South West Africa was surrendered to the South African Department of Native Affairs, falling finally into the clutch of Dr. Verwoerd, who was then the responsible Minister. Lecturing on the geography of apartheid in Parliament, Dr. Verwoerd stated, "there must be a buffer strip of at least 500 yards wide between the Native residential area and that of any other racial group. No development at all is allowed in the buffer strip". The Windhoek old location would have to go and a new one established at a more secure distance from the capital of white South West Africa.

Plans for a new location were rushed through the Windhoek town council with no real discussion permitted at African Advisory Board meetings. The people in the old location strenuously objected to the manner in which the whole scheme was being handled and instructed the members of their Advisory Board to register their objections with the town council.

The Administration and local authority having settled the issue in comfortable defiance of Advisory Board objections, however, the Africans exploded their hostility in the press. In 1958, the first letters appeared in the pages of the *Windhoek Advertiser* and the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, outlining the reasons for the refusal of the Windhoek location residents to move. They pointed out that Africans rejected the principle of apartheid on which the whole removal scheme was based. They detailed the economic hardships that the people would experience; for the rents in the new township would be considerably higher than in the old location, and the distance at which the new township was situated from their places of work would compel the Africans to meet transport costs which their wages were far too low to permit. Indeed, the majority of those living in the old location walked to their work already because they were unable to pay

for transport; and to any request for higher wages, the Administration's invariable reply was that it could not force employers to pay more than they were doing already. The correspondents further claimed that as inhabitants of South West Africa, the residents of the Windhoek location had a right to the land they occupied, and that to deprive them of their land would violate the right and the spirit in which the mandate was supposed to be administered. After stating that the Africans were not opposed to improvement, one correspondent wrote on behalf of the location residents: "Apartheid should not be confused with improvement. The policy of apartheid makes the interests of the Europeans paramount whilst depriving the Africans of economic opportunities, educational advancement and the enjoyment of political rights. The Africans are therefore not prepared to accept any scheme or plan which is based on apartheid, as they have suffered terribly under this inhuman policy."

The press raised the matter in one of the mayoral press conferences; but the mayor dismissed the objections as mere propaganda of the "rondloper kaffers" (kaffir-loafers). This immediately incensed African opinion, and the press was flooded with letters attacking the mayor's "irresponsible" statement and declaring that the Africans would never agree to move. Editorials in the press also regretted the "unfortunate" statement of the mayor and appealed to him to arrange a meeting with the location residents where the issue might be reasonably discussed.

In the end, the town council promised that as soon as Mr. Bruner Blignaut (Chief Native Commissioner) returned to Windhoek from the United Nations, a meeting would be held; and this was called on November 27, 1958. Present were the members of the Advisory Board and the Committee of Advisers to the Board (the latter were responsible for most of the letters in the press), the mayor, Mr. Jaap Snyman, the Superintendent of Locations (Mr. P. A. de Wet), and the Urban Areas Commissioner in the Native Affairs Department, Mr. van der Wath.

Mr. van der Wath gave the reasons for the Administration's intention to move the people.

1. Living conditions in the location were appalling.
2. The health of the people left much to be desired. There was little light in their huts and no fresh air whatsoever.
3. The living conditions had a bad effect on the working capacity of the people. The result was that many workers

were only able to do a half-day's work a day, and such people could not expect higher wages.

4. The new site was chosen because there was room for expansion; and, moreover, the future industrial site of the town would be in the direction of the new township, so that workers would be near their places of work.

5. The rents would be higher, but the 100 per cent. improvement in health facilities and other services justified the increase. The people could request reduction in rents if the income account showed a big surplus. The rents would be £1 19s. 6d. a month, while those who purchased the houses would only pay £1 for the services.

The meeting ended in confusion as the mayor refused to answer questions put to him. On November 28, 1958, the then Superintendent of Locations, Mr. P. A. de Wet, stated that the people would be moved to facilitate the implementation of the Government's apartheid policy. He further stated that the Advisory Board had consented to the removal. This was denied by the members of that Board on November 30, 1958, at a public meeting in the old location.

Another meeting with Mr. P. A. de Wet was held on January 1, 1959, at which he made it clear that the decision to move the people was unilaterally taken by the Administration and the local authorities. This the Advisory Board members reported to the residents of the location, who decided unanimously that they were not going to move.

This was the position in March, 1959. On May 1, 1959, I pointed out to the United Nations Committee on South West Africa that the Windhoek location "is another issue which will create a very explosive situation in South West Africa in the near future."

On October 4, 1959, the location superintendent called a meeting in the Herero section where he asked the people to appoint 'their' representative on the Valuation Board for houses in the old location. The people pointed out to him that they were not prepared to move. Mr. Vetira said at this meeting: ". . . we are not going to move, even if the other tribes move. We the Hereros will not move. Go and tell your Government and your police that now they can do what they want."

On October 12, 1959, I told the Fourth (Trusteeship) Committee of the General Assembly of the U.N. that the Administration was contemplating the use of guns and bulldozers to

move the people to the new location. Then, on October 29, a public meeting was held in the location under the chairmanship of Mr. Potgieter, the location superintendent. Present were: Mr. Hager, Chief Magistrate of Windhoek; Mr. B. Blignaut, Chief Native Commissioner; Mr. Jaap Snyman, Mayor of Windhoek; Mr. De Wet, Manager of the Municipal Native Affairs Department; Mr. van der Wath, Urban Areas Commissioner in the Native Affairs Department; Colonel du Preez, head of the "Special Branch" or political section of the South African Police in South West Africa; and other officials. The meeting was attended by 3,000-4,000 location residents.

The representatives of the people explained to the authorities that they were not prepared to move. Mr. Mbaeva said: "Don't you know that this country is ours? We shall not allow settlers to come here and do as they like."

Mr. Nelengani said: "If you whites as educated people are administering this country so badly that there is no co-operation between whites and non-whites, hand the administration over to the Africans."

On November 1, the local authorities began with the evaluation of the houses in the Damara section of the location. Women were forced against their will by municipal police to attach their finger-prints or signatures to documents. A deputation of Dandara women, on December 4, then requested the Administrator of South West, Mr. Daan Viljoen, to meet them; but he refused to do so.

On December 10, 1959, 11 people were killed and some 50 injured, 32 seriously, in clashes between the police and the inhabitants of the location. At 6 p.m. on the following day, December 11, I wrote in company with the other spokesmen for the indigenous peoples of South West Africa to the Chairman of the United Nations Fourth Committee, requesting a hearing at its final meeting of the session scheduled for that night at 8.30 p.m.

Confronted with our request, the Committee spent some three hours debating the procedural points involved; and then registered a vote firmly in our favour. At 1.30 a.m. we were invited to address the Committee and briefly put the facts of the situation before them. We asked that the United Nations should intervene forthwith; that the Secretary-General or a special Commission of the United Nations should be sent to the territory, or that the Security Council should be summoned.

The Fourth Committee passed the matter on to the United Nations Committee on South West Africa, which met on December 16 and heard us. We repeated our request for urgent intervention; and, on December 18, the Committee decided to send the following telegram to the Union Government.

“The Committee conveys to you its gravest concern over the recent regrettable incidents in Windhoek, resulting in the loss of life and bodily injury of many residents of the location. The Committee urgently requests the Mandatory Power to desist immediately from this deplorable use of force and from proceeding further with the enforced removal of the residents to the new site at Katutura. The Committee considers these actions of the Mandatory Power to be in complete disregard of human rights and dignity”.

On December 21, 1959, the Committee passed a resolution containing almost the same wording as its telegram, sending it to the Union Government and to the General Assembly of the United Nations. Another resolution was also passed drawing the attention of the Secretary-General to the situation in South West Africa. The African States have sent an urgent appeal to the Secretary-General to intervene in “this international territory”.

Action now rests with the Secretary-General. When the resolutions of the Fourth Committee were passed, he had already left on a tour of Africa; and they were to be forwarded to him. It is his judgment which will determine whether a special meeting of the General Assembly or the Security Council is to be convened, or a special visit paid to South West Africa by the Secretary-General as soon as possible. All we can do now is to hope and trust that he will act in one or all of the three ways open to him.