

Treacherous Crossing: Namibian Independence Debacle

BY OUR NAMIBIA CORRESPONDENT

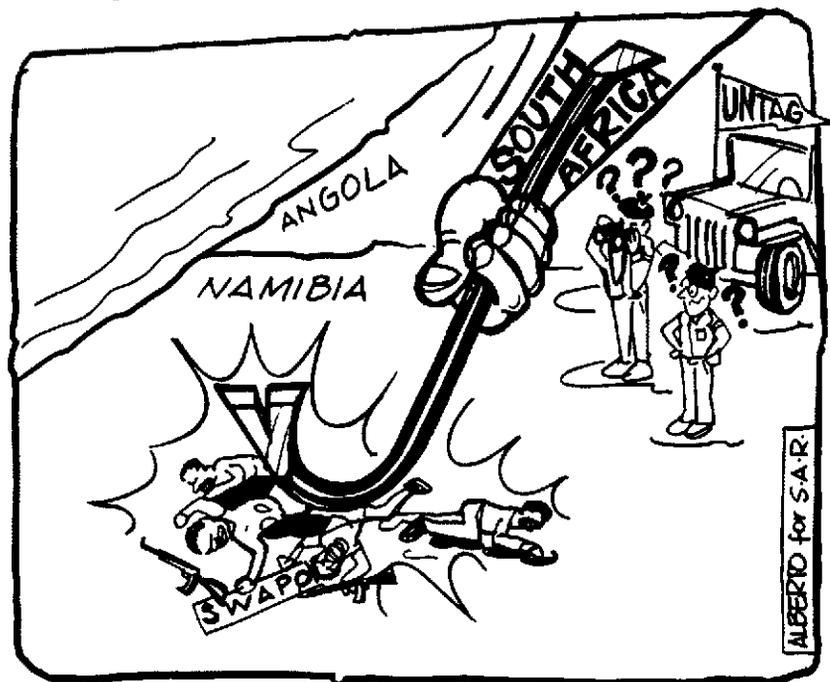
When guerrillas of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) stepped up their crossings from Angola into Namibia in the days leading up to April 1, the official start of Namibia's transition to independence and to elections in November, most observers were caught off guard.

Not so the notorious police counter-insurgency unit, Koevoet - although they claimed they were taken by surprise. Five hours after the official ceasefire was in place, just before sunrise on April 1, Koevoet attacked the guerrillas, claiming they were acting in self-defence. But it is now clear Koevoet seized what was for them a perfect opportunity for a final fling before being made redundant by peace. Koevoet, or "Crowbar," is the counter-insurgency unit of the South West African Police (SWAPOL - not to be confused with SWAPO).

Let's go back a few months.

In February this year, ten weeks before April 1, I spoke with a senior member of the South African security police stationed at Oshakati, the main centre of South African military operations in the Namibian war zones. He said then that the security police were aware that "several hundred" SWAPO guerrillas had entered Namibia and were carrying out what he called "political work." "We know where they are and are keeping tabs on them," he said, adding, "There hasn't been a serious military contact since August last year (inside Namibia) and we don't want to provoke an incident."

Two weeks later, the Windhoek Supreme Court granted an urgent



interdict against Koevoet. The order restrained the unit from harassing or attacking SWAPO members, after hearing evidence from former Koevoet members that they had been instructed to "go back to war if SWAPO wins the (independence) elections." As explained below, it seems clear from Koevoet's actions in April that it had plans to prolong the war by attacking SWAPO.

By April 1, most of the 3500 Koevoet members had been issued with new uniforms, and "integrated" into conventional police units. But as there are only 6,500 SWAPOL members, Koevoet, which claims to have killed over 80 percent of all guerrillas who died in the war, now form the bulk of the police force. Koevoet's sole function in the war was, according to earlier court evidence, the "elimination and interrogation" of guerrillas.

This, then, was the scenario on April 1.

Five hours after the ceasefire was officially in place, a Koevoet unit, claiming it was chasing cattle thieves, initiated the first battle of the day. By sunset more than fifteen battles had taken place over a 350km war front, refuting any claim that it was a spontaneous, localized action.

Eyewitness accounts all insist the first battles were initiated by Koevoet. In terms of UN Resolution 435, the SWAPOL men were supposed to be armed only with sidearms - but despite this, they went into the first battles equipped with heavy-calibre machine guns, grenades, mortars and rocket launchers.

The battles were brutal and bloody. A number of guerrillas' corpses were mutilated beyond

recognition, evidence that they had simply been run over by the heavy Casspir armoured vehicles.

Other bodies, including some I saw, bore evidence of elimination after capture – the only wounds being bullet holes through the forehead. Which is not to say that the guerrillas were innocent victims. They were heavily armed and in several cases fought back strongly – seven armoured vehicles were destroyed, and more than 30 members of the police and military killed.

Over 300 guerrillas died in what seems a futile start to the independence process. Yet eyewitnesses I spoke to, and communications received from the guerrillas, told the same story: those who entered Namibia just before April 1 said they expected to be met by the forces of UNTAG (United Nations

Transitional Assistance Group), and to hand over their arms. “We came not in war but in peace,” they claimed. “We came to meet the United Nations.”

SWAPO Misjudgments

However, at all levels SWAPO committed a series of strategic and political errors, partly through not taking available information into account.

- The UN wasn't ready to protect the guerrillas. There were fewer than 1000 of the total 4500 UNTAG members inside Namibia on April 1, and only 100 or so in the war zones.

- Basic ground intelligence gathering would have revealed that Koevoet, despite propaganda to the contrary, had been disbanded in name only and were still a formidable fighting force.

- SWAPO had very little to gain and plenty to lose by coming across the border heavily armed. Although the movement never signed the Geneva Protocols which sought to confine them behind Angola's 16th parallel, the international perception was and is that they had tacitly agreed to those Protocols.

- SWAPO clearly has overwhelming popular support in Namibia and the guerrilla incursion was hence futile, although perhaps SWAPO strategists believed the psychological effect of having armed combatants inside the country would further strengthen its election chances.

- SWAPO's action has lost it considerable international support and prestige. Even Angola, the country which at great cost to itself supported SWAPO through fourteen years of war, expressed its disapproval.



One week late, UN forces arrive in war zone

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Ironically, the fighting does appear to have boosted SWAPO's image in northern Namibia. The police and military had in recent months been conducting an intensive anti-SWAPO campaign, and had launched a massive campaign to win over the hearts and minds of the people. But the brutality of their campaign against SWAPO and the destruction of the civilian property during the attacks has had a significant effect in shoring up support for SWAPO. In addition to killing guerrillas ("young boys, who thought they could come home in peace," as a priest at a graveside put it), they destroyed villages, harvests and food stores.

Nevertheless, the loss of face and support suffered by SWAPO has been serious for the movement. It placed the UNTAG forces, already two to four weeks behind schedule, in an invidious position. With South Africa insisting that the entire independence process should be called off, the UN was faced with an impossible situation: either face having Namibian independence called off after decades of negotiations, or allow South Africa to free its forces from bases. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, coincidentally in Namibia, is reported to have delivered an ultimatum to the UN representative, Martti Ahtisaari: lift restrictions on the SADF forces, or lose Namibian independence. The UN lifted the restrictions and let loose the dogs of war, who swiftly resorted to terrorism. "We stood outside a homestead close to Endola with a young man of 25," reported British observers MP Peter Pike and human rights lawyer John Macdonald in early May. "He showed us the hole where he had been buried head first in the sand and beaten by Koevoet." The two observers also met 40 head-

men from villages in the same region, of whom 26 had been beaten, many with the scars to prove it. Pike and Macdonald called for UN police to accompany all South African police on patrol, and appealed for an end to both Koevoet's role and the use of Casspirs.

Koevoet's Military Strike

It is probably the case that SWAPO's ill-timed decision to send in its troops was taken at the highest level, and that the leadership will have to bear responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Nonetheless, the more important story is the machinations of Koevoet and the military.

The most likely scenario which emerges from the April 1 events is that the security forces, particularly Koevoet, have no desire to see the war end and an inevitable SWAPO victory in the elections. Specula-

tion is that, aware for several days, weeks or even months, of the presence of the sizable force of guerrillas, Koevoet chose April 1 to attack. In less than 24 hours, they launched their brutal assaults over a long front, choosing the military option over the political and diplomatic one.

Pretoria, to give them the benefit of the doubt, probably did not know in advance of Koevoet's intentions. But it was swift to capitalize on what was for them a golden opportunity. They used the incursion as an excuse to deliver one last military blow to SWAPO, re-arming 700 white farmers who had traditionally formed the second line of military defence. And they seized the moment to launch a powerful international propaganda campaign.

The battles have brought into sharp focus the total dependence of UNTAG on the South African military and their considerable disadvantage in attempting to be impartial - in the north, UNTAG bases are often inside South African bases, and much of their intelligence and information comes from SADF and SWAPOL.

The most important effect of the battles, though, has been to give the South Africans the moral high ground in haggling over the finer details of the independence process. This has led to a new aggressiveness in South Africa's dealings with the UN, and will inevitably lead to them exploiting every opportunity they can to undermine the extent of a SWAPO election victory.

Fortunately, the UN does seem to be strengthening its hand over time and to be more firmly in command. Still, the events of April 1 have provided some indication of just how difficult the transition to independence and elections is likely to be.



In Windhoek, police stop march of 10,000 protesting privatization of Namibia's public sector

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