

INTERVIEWS IN DEPTH

# Namibia

# SWAPO



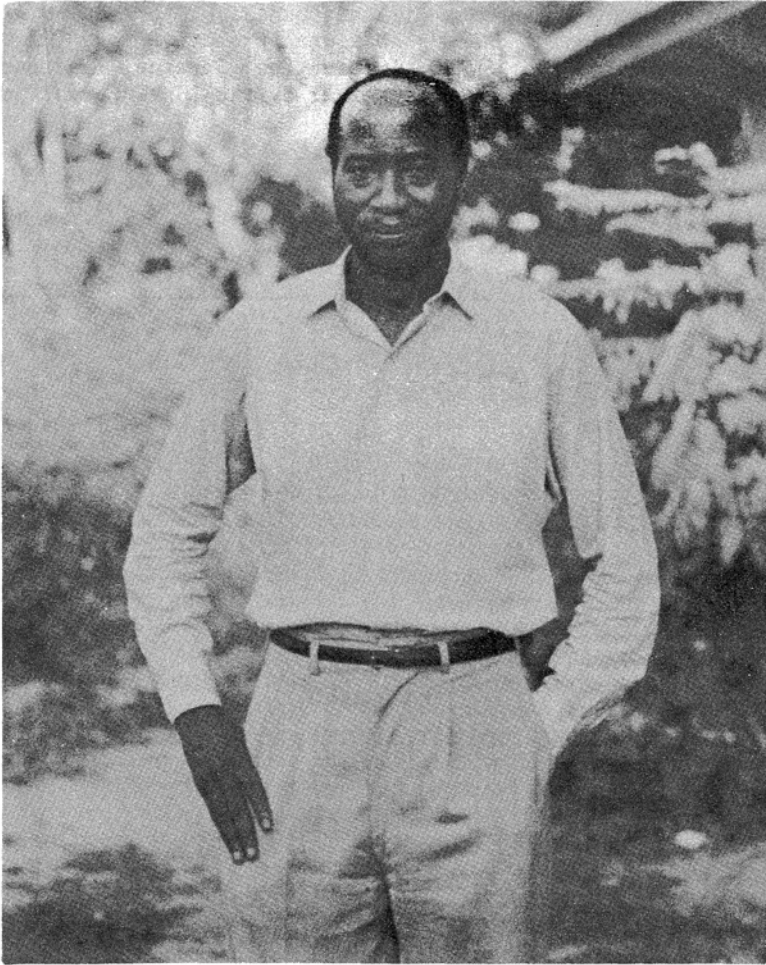
*Andreas Shipanga*

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**INTERVIEWS IN DEPTH**  
**Namibia, SWAPO 1**



Interview with Andreas Shipanga  
Director - SWAPO Information Service  
Member of the National Executive

# **Andreas Shipanga**

Andreas Shipanga is a founding member of the South West Africa People's Organization. He has been a SWAPO Field Organizer inside Namibia, a branch chairman in Cape Town, South Africa, and SWAPO representative to various African countries. In 1960 Shipanga became a member of SWAPO's National Executive and since 1970 he has directed the SWAPO Information Service. Andreas Shipanga was interviewed by Dennis Mercer of the LSM Information Center in October, 1972.

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## A HISTORY OF THE ARMED STRUGGLE

PERHAPS, COMRADE SHIPANGA, YOU COULD BRIEFLY DISCUSS YOUR OWN BACKGROUND. HOW DID YOU COME INTO POLITICS AND THE NATIONAL LIBERATION STRUGGLE IN NAMIBIA?

Actually, my political development began when I started teaching school in a rural district of Namibia north of Tsumeb. There I saw the needs of the African children and I began to understand the nature of our people's oppression. As a new teacher I felt that my students had to show immediate results and that I had to exercise strict discipline so that they could keep up. Some children were quite bright and very eager to learn, but most, I found, were weak and sleepy at school. After three weeks of teaching I decided to go around and find out where and how these children lived. I discovered to my horror that many had to walk over fifteen kilometers to school. Every morning at four o'clock they got up to work the land; then at eight they ran to school - literally ran, and without having eaten. When they got to school, of course, they simply collapsed.

Later I went down south and saw the white children. All of them were living very near their school or staying at a boarding school. They were very healthy and wide awake, obviously lacking nothing in the way of food or transportation facilities. Seeing this big difference compared with conditions for African children in the rural areas, I asked my-

self if it was really worth trying to teach African children under such circumstances, demanding that they keep up with the instruction. I decided then that before we could ever have a good educational system in Namibia we would have to liberate the country as a whole.

In 1955 I quit my teaching post and went to South Africa. In Cape Town I found many compatriots, including Hermann Toivo ja Toivo, building a political organization aimed essentially at destroying the contract labor system in our country. I joined them in this work and in 1957 we formed the Ovamboland People's Congress (OPC). The following year we changed the name to Ovamboland People's Organization (OPO). Branches were established both in South Africa - where thousands of Namibians were working in the mines and big cities - and in Namibia. Our headquarters were in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia.

I became branch chairman of the OPC, and later the OPO, in Cape Town and continued in this position when SWAPO was formed in early 1960 to replace OPO. Then, in 1963, I returned to Namibia as a Field Organizer.

WHAT PROMPTED THE DECISION TO CHANGE FROM THE OPO TO THE SOUTH WEST AFRICA PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATION?

Well, as I said, the OPO was formed essentially to abolish the contract labor system. Since the bulk of contract workers are from northern Namibia, mainly Ovamboland, we felt it necessary to create an organization of Ovambo workers, who could say: "This is our organization; with it we can cripple the contract system." We found, however, that the name itself, Ovamboland People's Organization, was causing doubts among other Namibian workers who came to see the OPO as a tribal or regional organization. Actually the OPO had been organized and was led not only by Ovambos but also by Hereros, Damaras, coloured people...in fact, members of all the ethnic groupings in Namibia participated in the work of OPO. However, by 1960 we recognized that our struggle could not succeed if we concentrated only on the contract workers from Ovamboland. We had seen the South African regime break our strikes, using unorganized Namibians to take the place of striking workers. We realized the need to organize all the African peasants and workers, and in 1960 we changed our name to SWAPO and started building a national organization representing all the oppressed people in Namibia. In a sense, SWAPO was continuing the work of OPO, but it aimed at more than smashing contract labor - it was to become a popular front leading the struggle for freedom and independence for the whole Namibian people.

PERHAPS YOU COULD DISCUSS SOME OF THE EARLY DEVELOPMENTS IN SWAPO WHICH SHAPED THE STRUGGLE IN NAMIBIA?

The significant developments in SWAPO, as far back as 1960, were determined by our conflict with South Africa. Even before 1960 the South African Special Branch (security police) took great interest in the OPC and OPO, especially when we began to co-operate with the African National Congress and other Congress movements in South Africa. But open confrontation really began in December 1959, with the South African army and police shooting down unarmed civilians during a peaceful demonstration in Windhoek. Our people gathered to protest the Bantustan policy (South Africa was just then beginning to devise these so-called "Homelands" to divide and control the people) and were met by violent repression: 13 people were killed and over 60 wounded. From this we learned just how ruthless the enemy could be, and decided that we had to develop a new strategy for achieving our liberation - one taking account of the need for armed struggle.

In March 1960 SWAPO was organized into a truly national movement. We established a system of national branches, the basic working units of SWAPO, throughout the country and launched a full-scale campaign to organize both the workers in mines and factories and peasants in the rural areas. You see, Namibian peasants are just as exploited as the workers - in fact, they are the source of cheap African labor, which is the foundation for the whole economic system in Namibia. So we went to the peasants, explaining to them the policies of SWAPO and organizing them for the struggle.

In 1961 we held a very important National Congress in Windhoek where we examined our progress since 1958, in particular the results of our diplomatic efforts at the United Nations. Representatives of our people had gone to New York to petition the UN and we continued clinging to the illusion that the United Nations could really do something to get South Africa out of Namibia. But now we looked back on that day in December when our people were shot down in cold blood and saw what the UN did with the information and petitions it got from SWAPO...the action it took. We came to full agreement: it was nothing but fine-sounding resolutions piling up in the UN archives. This recognition led us to the decision at the Congress of 1961 to prepare for the eventual armed struggle in Namibia.

Soon we began recruiting volunteers for training in guerrilla warfare. There was military study going on before

1961, but it was not connected with SWAPO. In South Africa we had a clandestine organization, the "Yu Chi Chen," which in Chinese means "guerrilla warfare." It was made up of South Africans and Namibians, including myself and some other current members of SWAPO. We studied Marxism-Leninism and the writings of Mao Tse-tung and "Che" Guevara. This was only a study circle, but all the same it was forming cadre who were to become the instructors and leaders of our guerrillas.

In early 1962 the first group of SWAPO volunteers went for military training to Egypt, which was then the only independent African country with a capacity for training our fighters. More than two hundred volunteers went that year. Then in 1963 Algeria gained her independence and the Organization of African Unity came into being; both pledged to help those liberation movements committed to fighting with arms. Later, friendly countries in Asia and Europe also accepted our freedom fighters for training.

In April 1963 SWAPO held another National Congress which reaffirmed the determination of the Namibian people to fight for their freedom and dealt with the many practical problems of preparing for armed struggle. For example, we had to make preparations for the re-entry of our trained militants into the country. It's not enough to train freedom fighters; it is also necessary to establish lines of communication and logistical means - not only with independent African countries, but within the country itself. For example, we had to establish reception centers for those returning from training who had been out of the country for some time and would not be familiar with the current situation. Who would receive them? Who could they contact without fear of betrayal to the South African police? These were problems that had to be solved.

So, in 1963, we started building our communication lines, developing an infrastructure in Namibia. By the end of 1964, those who had been in training for two years were sent into the country to set up rural bases for training the local people. Establishing these bases was important because in 1966, after we initiated guerrilla warfare, South African forces effectively closed the frontiers.

On 26 August 1966 SWAPO launched the armed struggle. Our first action was an attack at Nkurumbaje in the northwest. Of course, from the opening shots South African officials swore they would wipe out the whole lot of "terrorists," "infiltrators," "communist agents," etc. Two days later the Oshikongo administrative center was attacked and leveled to the ground by our fighters.



This is how we started, on the military level. Guerrilla operations spread from the northwest to the northeast, into Ovamboland, the Okovango, Caprivi Strip and then into the Grootfontein District. There are still many places where military activity hasn't begun, but now people everywhere are actively engaged in supporting those who are fighting.

#### HOW WAS SWAPO ORGANIZED PRIOR TO THE BEGINNING OF ARMED STRUGGLE AND HOW WAS THIS ORGANIZATION MODIFIED AFTER THE SOUTH AFRICAN REGIME BANNED SWAPO IN 1966?

From 1960 on, our most important task was to broaden the popular base of SWAPO, to develop our system of national branches. The oppressors used to arrest SWAPO leaders or dismiss them from their jobs, but we continued open, nationwide organizing right up to June 1966 - so by the time SWAPO was banned we had national branches throughout the country. These branches were the basic units of SWAPO, each representing at least 200 but not more than 600 people. Their work was basically to carry out political education and agitation. They would hold public meetings, rallies and demonstrations, explaining to the masses what SWAPO stood for and what we as a people could do to liberate our nation. Of course, when SWAPO was banned we could no longer conduct public campaigns. We converted the national branches into cells, into much smaller units operating underground. These cells have continued to organize and conduct political education among the masses, but they have also become more and more engaged in recruiting guerrillas and supplying our fighting units in the field.

Since SWAPO was banned, therefore, we have maintained the same overall organization; the cells, though much smaller and more numerous than the former branches, co-ordinate their activities either directly among themselves at the district level or by meeting with SWAPO regional leadership. Our regional leaders co-ordinate the work of SWAPO throughout the seven regions of Namibia and are directly responsible to national leadership.

The National Congress is the supreme organ of SWAPO; it is the policy-making body of the organization. However, because of the difficult conditions in Namibia since 1966, when the racist regime declared a state of emergency and stepped up its repressive activities, our Congress no longer meets inside the country annually as it used to do. Our most recent Congress met in Tanga, Tanzania from December

26, 1969 to January 3, 1970. It brought together delegates from all the organs of SWAPO, including representatives of the cells and regions who faced many difficulties and dangers in order to attend. In Tanga we assessed the progress of the struggle, made changes in our policies and organization, criticized and in some cases replaced leadership and strengthened our commitment to the struggle. The resolutions of the Congress set the principles and policies of SWAPO and, as such, now guide the work of all SWAPO members.

The National Congress also elects, and where necessary suspends, members of SWAPO's two other national organs - the National Executive and the Central Committee. The National Executive is composed of eleven members selected from the Central Committee and is responsible for the day-to-day implementation of SWAPO policy, seeing to it that the resolutions of the Congress are carried out by all the various organs of SWAPO, including the military. As you know, my responsibilities on the Executive are mainly for information and publicity, including production of SWAPO publications such as *Namibia Today*. However, my comrades and I on the National Executive also work together to find solutions to the many immediate practical problems which arise in the course of the struggle. Our Central Committee, with 35 members, is the "watchdog" of the National Executive. It critically oversees the work of the Executive, often making recommendations to it. All major decisions of the Executive must have the approval of the Central Committee. For example, the National Executive alone could not have decided to start the armed struggle. This decision - a drastic step for our whole nation - required Central Committee approval as well as the endorsement of the Congress.

#### HOW DID THE BEGINNING OF ARMED STRUGGLE AFFECT SWAPO'S LEADERSHIP SITUATION?

With the outbreak of guerrilla warfare in Namibia the racist regime immediately banned SWAPO and arrested 17 of our national leaders. This was certainly a blow to the organization, but we had been preparing for such a situation since 1961. That year we began developing cadre to replace prominent national leaders who were well-known to the enemy and thus liable to be arrested or detained. In 1964 we stopped issuing membership cards. I could say, then, that by 1966 we had already taken steps to insure the continuation of SWAPO's work...to operate underground.

Our new leaders, however, were not well-known among the broad masses. In a backward country with a colonial history

like ours it is difficult for people to have confidence in somebody just by being familiar with his name, without ever seeing him. People want somebody they recognize, someone who is brave in action. Several leaders have become known just by their daring, like when the South African regime put a \$2000 reward on the head of Patrick Iambo, one of our military leaders. Now all the people can identify with that leader. Still, it takes considerable time to develop stature as a national leadership when you begin operating underground.

GIVEN THE NECESSITY OF CLANDESTINE POLITICAL WORK, HAVE YOU BEEN ABLE TO ESTABLISH BROAD POPULAR RECOGNITION OF SWAPO LEADERSHIP SINCE 1966?

Well, we have not yet found a really adequate solution to this problem. Many of our prominent national leaders have been held in detention in Windhoek or Walvis Bay, where they cannot be involved in SWAPO operations, especially not the military. As I mentioned, these strategic activities are carried out under a SWAPO leadership which is largely unknown to the enemy. Nevertheless, the older leaders still symbolize to the peasants and workers our national resistance and struggle for freedom. They are defiant and outspoken in opposition to the regime. On occasion they play an important diplomatic role, like when well-known SWAPO figures appeared before the UN Secretary-General when he came to Windhoek and, more recently, when they presented a petition to this Mr. Escher.\* In these ways they help maintain a broad public presence for SWAPO in Namibia.

## CULTURAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS OF THE STRUGGLE

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR OBSTACLES YOU HAVE FACED SINCE LAUNCHING THE ARMED STRUGGLE?

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\*Dr. Alfred Escher visited Namibia in October, 1972 as a special envoy of the UN Secretary-General. He held talks with South Africa's racist leaders on the subject of South Africa's illegal occupation of Namibia, and on the occasion he met with SWAPO leaders in Windhoek. (D.M.)



To wage an armed struggle, especially by a people oppressed for many generations, is certainly no easy task. First we had to conduct political education among the masses to destroy the myth of the all-conquering white man and convince the people that we could fight back with arms and win - that it is in fact better to die fighting for freedom than to die of TB or malnutrition. Of course, we know that our struggle will be a long and difficult one. Our enemy is strong. We are fighting not only the white settlers and the South African regime, but we are also up against international capital, which sustains racism and fascism throughout southern Africa. Our people are aware, however, of the world-wide struggles - successful struggles - against exploitation. We have seen oppressed peoples fight for and increasingly gain their freedom and independence in Vietnam, Cuba, Algeria, Guiné-Bissau and, now, here in southern Africa, so we know it *can* be done. We are learning a lot from these other struggles and applying the lessons to our own.

Of course, the geographical position of Namibia makes our task difficult, and South Africa has compounded the problem by trying to close off Namibia's borders. They even went so far as to erect barbed wire all along our borders with Angola and Zambia. But our people have continued to fight. You know, the enemy was quite surprised when the first guerrilla actions took place in the west near the Atlantic Ocean. I remember the big headline in Johannesburg's *Sunday*

*Times* when the war broke out: "Did the Terrorists Come By Air?" They couldn't imagine how we got weapons and fighters to the west coast.

We are learning to overcome the difficulties of distance and geography. For example, we are now organizing greater numbers of people to fight in their home areas. Often the best fighter is the peasant who sometimes tills the land and sometimes fights. He knows the terrain, the people, the traditions of the area; moreover, he will not be suspected like someone who had left the country and returned or was a known member of SWAPO.

PERHAPS YOU COULD DESCRIBE THE GEOGRAPHICAL SITUATION INSIDE NAMIBIA, PARTICULARLY IN THOSE AREAS WHERE THE GUERRILLAS ARE OPERATING?

We have four operational zones in Namibia; that is, four areas where the guerrillas are well-established and active on a day-to-day, month-to-month basis. Currently, all the operational zones are located in the northern regions - you know, the colonialists divided Namibia into seven administrative regions.

Our first operational zone, Kaokoveld, is in the northwest below the Cunene River. Kaokoveld is a dry, mountainous area with forests and grasslands further north toward the Cunene. Zone two is Ovamboland, which is essentially flatland with some semi-tropical areas near the Angolan border. Number three is Okovango and Grootfontein District - one zone composed of two parts. Okovango is the so-called "native reservation," where there are thick forests and grasslands or savannahs. Grootfontein is a highland region and a "white area." It is one of the largest copper mining centers in Namibia as well as the last railway stop in the north. But mainly it is a farming area, occupied by white settlers who raise cattle and sheep and also grow maize.

The fourth operational zone, the Caprivi Strip, is very different from the others. Situated between the Zambezi in the east and the Okovango River to the west and south, the Caprivi is a tropical area crossed by many streams and thick with vegetation. Huge stretches of land have been made into South African military bases, where troops undergo training in tropical warfare. As far back as 1929 South Africa declared this a military region. Today Caprivi is a strategic area for South Africa, especially in support of its racist allies, Portugal and Rhodesia. For example, from Katima Mulilo Airbase - the largest airbase south of the

equator - the Portuguese air force operates against the MPLA freedom fighters in eastern Angola.

The African population in Caprivi has been greatly reduced as a result of recent military activity. There used to be some 19,000 Africans in this area, but over the past several years many have been forced to flee into Botswana or Zambia when their homes and crops were burned by South African troops.

The inhabitants of the other zones are almost all African peasants. At certain points, especially in Okovango, they've been uprooted from their traditional areas - where they used to work the land and fish - and relocated in "strategic hamlets" or, as they're called, "security villages" where they are surrounded by the army and allowed to move about only with special passes issued by the military. Outside these concentration camp villages, most of the Africans in our operational zones are engaged in subsistence agriculture and cattle-raising. The few whites in these areas are missionaries or traders, though most of the traders, except those at military bases, have had to leave because of the fighting.

#### WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON PATTERNS OF SETTLEMENT AMONG NAMI-BIANS?

We don't have villages like you find in Zambia or in Angola, where many families live close together and share a central yard. Our settlements have always been very scattered. One *shamba* or cultivated area may be twenty kilometers away from the next one, depending on the quality of land and size of the cattle herds. Since our people are traditionally cattle raisers, families have built their homes far enough apart that their cattle will not graze on one another's pasture.

#### HAS THIS SPARSENESS OF POPULATION PROVED TO BE A PROBLEM FOR SWAPO?

Well, there have been both advantages and disadvantages. It has meant extra political work - for instance, organizing, canvassing from home to home has been more difficult. As a field organizer I sometimes had to travel eighty kilometers in a day to reach just five families. Also, it was difficult bringing people together for public meetings. It is asking a lot for a person to walk twenty kilometers to attend a meeting. On the military side, however, we have been able to operate very effectively with locally trained

fighters who live and work at their homes, join the guerrillas for military actions and then return to homes dispersed over a wide area. They cannot be as easily controlled, identified or rounded up for interrogation and torture by the enemy.

## MILITARY TACTICS AND COOPERATION WITH THE PEOPLE

DO YOU HAVE BASE AREAS IN THE OPERATIONAL ZONES?

Yes, we have base areas. Not with fixed structures, but simply with tunnels or sheltered areas. Some are used for storage of arms and other material; others, located separately from the arms caches, serve as temporary base camps for our guerrilla units. Both are frequently relocated. We have not, however, established liberated zones in Namibia. So the South African regime and army still controls the population by day. Our units must be small and very mobile, operating from shifting bases and supported clandestinely by the people.

WHAT MILITARY TACTICS DOES SWAPO EMPLOY?

Our tactics are mainly small-unit sabotage, ambush and harassment of enemy posts. We ambush river traffic, especially patrol boats, and use land mines against convoys on the roads. Actually, our guerrillas have been particularly effective with land mines. We also attack military installations using bazookas, rifles, machine guns and hand grenades - we don't yet have any mortars. These attacks on military posts are much less frequent than ambushes, but they are still very important. Equipping all our fighters, especially with modern weapons, has been one of our biggest problems. Some of our units still have to use very old equipment, like the .333; others have fighters with no arms at all - of any kind. So capturing arms from the enemy is an important objective in our operations.

PERHAPS YOU COULD DESCRIBE THE ORGANIZATION OF THE *PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY OF NAMIBIA* (PLAN), THE MILITARY WING OF SWAPO?

In the operational zones the guerrillas are organized in platoons. These units carry out most of our operations,

but sometimes several platoons are joined for large-scale operations. Each unit is led by a political commissar and a commander. The political commissar is responsible for maintaining morale and discipline as well as conducting political education within the unit; he makes sure that the fighters act in accordance with SWAPO's basic political principles, especially in relation to the local population. The commander looks to the military side - logistics, tactics, the conduct of operations, military discipline. The platoon leaders are assisted by a deputy commander, deputy political commissar and other officers responsible for first aid, reconnaissance, and so on.

Within each operational zone the platoon leaders co-ordinate their work through the regional leadership, headed by a political commissar and a commander. At the national level there is the SWAPO Military Commission, comprised of military commanders as well as leaders from non-military spheres of struggle. The Military Commission is charged with devising our military strategy. It travels throughout the operational zones and meets with platoon and smaller unit leaders, who advise the Commission about conditions in their areas. The people's political development, their geographical situation, proximity to enemy bases, as well as the strength of the enemy - these realities differ from one area to the next and must be carefully considered by the Commission in developing SWAPO's military strategy.

I would like to emphasize that in SWAPO we don't divorce military from political matters - it is always politics which leads the gun. We have no purely military leaders; we are not militarists. Everybody in PLAN is politically motivated; our cadre are trained both politically and militarily, and the military is completely integrated into the overall structure of SWAPO. For example, some members of both our National Executive and Central Committee are field commanders, and a large portion of the delegates to our last Congress were militants from the front.

DO YOU HAVE POPULAR MILITIAS APART FROM THE REGULAR UNITS?

No, because as I said, we don't have liberated areas as yet. There are those who remain at home but train with and join the guerrillas in local actions. They do not, however, form local defense units; they simply could not fight it out on their own when the South African army moved into the area.





#### HOW ARE THE UNITS OF *PLAN* SUPPLIED?

Most supplies - food, clothing and even medicines come from the Namibian people themselves. In his speech before the Pretoria court, Hermann Toivo ja Toivo declared that he had passed on to the guerrilla fighters not only medicines and money but even dynamite which he got from SWAPO members working in the mines. This is how we must do it.

In our situation we cannot rely on supplies from outside; we must be well-organized inside the country. It is mainly the responsibility of SWAPO cells to organize the people to help supply the freedom fighters. The political commissar for each platoon arranges with local cell leaders for supplying his unit. Sometimes the units pay for supplies, but if there are no funds, they exchange tobacco, salt or even an overcoat for an ox or goat. Sometimes the

people will give food freely, but we stress that the Liberation Army must always be fair with the people.

In some places the guerrillas grow their own food. Where the rainfall is good or there is a nearby water supply, they can grow tomatoes, or even maize - but generally only crops which ripen quickly.

ARE THERE SWAPO CADRE WORKING ACTIVELY AMONG THE CIVILIAN POPULATION?

Yes. On the whole these cadre are part of our guerrilla units; they are fighters as well as political organizers, teachers and nurses. But there are also those who are more or less permanently integrated within the rural communities or working among the contract laborers.

Our most advanced civilian programs are in the medical field; we have established medical services wherever our militants are active. Our literacy classes have also achieved some success, but they are still in a very early stage of development. In addition, SWAPO cadre distribute needed goods, such as clothing (which we get in small quantities from donors abroad) among the people. Also they conduct political education campaigns among the masses.

DO YOU HAVE PROGRAMS AIMED AT INCREASING PRODUCTION IN THE OPERATIONAL ZONES?

Yes. We are just now establishing a vocational training center in one friendly country, Zambia. Here we intend to train cadre who will later return to Namibia to work with the people in the fields and help them increase and diversify agricultural production. We are preparing to initiate this program soon, now that we have land for the school and are ready to put up the structures.

WHAT ARE SWAPO'S PRESENT ACTIVITIES IN AREAS OUTSIDE THE OPERATIONAL ZONES?

Our main activities are carried out clandestinely by the cells in urban and rural areas alike. The cells distribute propaganda material among the population and carry out political education. They gather information about the enemy's movements and, as I mentioned, collect supplies for the guerrilla units. The cells organize political agitation

and, very importantly, recruit new members and politically train them. Within each cell the political commissar works many months with small groups of recruits, testing and instructing them in the essential code of conduct of a SWAPO activist. Thus, our cadre are first of all political activists - only when they have attained the correct political motivation and direction at the cell level can they be accepted for military training.

PERHAPS YOU COULD DESCRIBE SWAPO'S OVERALL STRATEGY FOR THE ARMED STRUGGLE?

We are in the first phase of the armed struggle in Namibia; that is, we are still trying to consolidate our



rural bases. For the time being we have ruled out certain kinds of operations, such as sabotage in towns. We know that if we embarked now on an urban sabotage campaign, we would not be able to defend the African population against the repression of the well-armed white settlers and South African army. Our struggle must be carried forward by guerrilla tactics, operating first with platoons and later with larger units covering wider areas. Eventually the operational zones will extend throughout the whole of Namibia. However, I don't think we will be able to create liberated areas - the pattern of our struggle will probably be more like that of Algeria - the Algerian guerrillas didn't establish liberated territories; they sustained guerrilla strongholds in key regions and wore down their stronger enemy. In Namibia there are some few forest and mountainous regions, but most of the country is open grasslands. This makes guerrilla warfare very difficult. Moreover, we are confronting not only the 125,000 white settlers in Namibia, but the four million white South Africans as well. Our enemy has a modern, well-equipped army, a strong economic, industrial base, plus the support of imperialist countries. After six years of operations, however, we are confident that our armed struggle will be successful. Our people are determined to fight on until we gain our freedom.

## THE 1972 STRIKES AGAINST THE CONTRACT LABOR SYSTEM

FROM DECEMBER 1971 UNTIL JUNE 1972, NAMIBIAN WORKERS CARRIED OUT AN EFFECTIVE NATIONWIDE STRIKE. WHAT WERE THE FUNDAMENTAL CAUSES OF THIS STRIKE?

The underlying cause, of course, was the oppressive contract labor system in Namibia. You see, most peasant families cannot survive on the land in the reservations. Able-bodied men must sell themselves to white employers - usually on a contract they do not even sign. And once a man is sold on contract, he's finished - he ceases to be treated as a human being, becoming merely an object of labor. The contract worker has no rights; he has no say about where he works, the hours of work, what sort of a job he must take or how much he earns.

The contract labor system, established by South Africa in 1927, has created a proletariat of peasant-workers, openly sold on the market and ruthlessly exploited. These peasant-workers are the backbone of the national liberation struggle;



the struggle against the contract labor system forms an important part of the larger struggle of the Namibian people. There have been strikes many times before, but this strike demonstrated an organization and unity among the people that we have never seen before. The strike began on 13 December and by the 15th it covered the whole country. This is a result of the organizing work and growing political consciousness among our people.

There were workers' committees throughout the country and a workers' central committee which brought together representatives of the local committees. The South African Minister of Police alleged that the strike was instigated by SWAPO, but this is not entirely true. The Acting Presi-

dent of SWAPO, now banned from Namibia, was head of the workers' central committee and many SWAPO members were strike leaders. However, this strike - a political strike against the whole contract labor system - was to a very great extent organized and led by the contract workers themselves. The workers' committees, by the way, are still active inside the country.

FOLLOWING THE STRIKE THERE WERE CASES OF WHITES - AS WITH THE WINDHOEK CHAMBER OF COMMERCE - ADVOCATING CHANGES IN THE CONTRACT LABOR SYSTEM AND EVEN SUGGESTING THE FORMATION OF BLACK LABOR UNIONS. HOW DO YOU VIEW THESE DEVELOPMENTS?

Well, this came out clearly in the white press-statements like, "Let us admit we need blacks. Black labor keeps the country going. Now there is unrest among blacks and we need to change." Even strong supporters of the racist regime started saying the system was very bad. You know, even the magistrate trying the strike leaders' case stated that the contract labor system was outmoded and no longer necessary.

SWAPO has always campaigned for the rights of our people, especially their rights as workers to form trade unions and bargain for better conditions. However, these suggestions from the white racists of Namibia are motivated by the fear of a chaotic and dangerous situation on the black labor front; the fear that another crippling strike may soon break out again. The chairman of the Chamber of Commerce pointed out that if Africans are allowed to form trade unions, they will have "responsible" union leaders. "Responsible" trade unions are just what you've got in capitalist Europe and America, where union bosses, bribed by the capitalists, sell out the interests of the workers to big business. I'm certain this is what the white employers in Namibia have got in mind. They would like to consolidate the exploitation of Namibian workers through trade unions responsible to them and not to the workers. But I don't think they can succeed. Our people have come too far politically - through the hard experience of the strike, for instance - to accept such trade union bosses. If unions were formed, they would demand that their leaders be the veterans not only of this strike but of the many campaigns for freedom and independence in the country. The workers have made their goals clear. For example, the striking workers on trial in Windhoek said, "We are fighting for our human rights - and human rights are not only a matter of bread and butter, it is more than that." As long as South African occupation of Namibia continues, the struggle of the workers, the guerrillas and the people as a whole will continue to grow.

## HAS THE STRIKE HAD ANY AFFECT ON THE ARMED STRUGGLE?

As soon as the strike broke out the militancy of the people increased greatly. When South Africa rounded up the strikers and sent them to the reservations, a revolt erupted in Ovamboland. Some people just took up bows and arrows and attacked the South African army and police. Many, however, came to join the ranks of the freedom fighters; in fact, we had more volunteers than ever before. Of course, SWAPO then faced the problem of providing political education, military training and arms for all these recruits. I can say that we are managing to solve this problem and that the Liberation Army has grown significantly since the strike.

But we have to remember that it takes time to guide our people's militant spirit in the right political direction. It can be dangerous to arm people just because they are furious. Protracted liberation war is not for furious and hence often impulsive men and women - it is for people who are politically motivated and self-disciplined.

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN

### WHAT HAS BEEN THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE NAMIBIAN STRUGGLE?

Women have been as active in the struggle as men. Sometimes they have been even more militant. I recall, for example, that in 1959 I attended a public rally in Walvis Bay where we spoke about petitioning the UN to come to Namibia. Just at the close of the meeting a woman came from a section of the crowd where a number of women had been talking among themselves. She asked for the bullhorn. "I have only a short message," she said. "It seems that our men are only concerned with talking about the United Nations. We say: let them look after the children and prepare food for just six or nine months and we'll see quite another solution to our problems in this country." This critical message from these women had its impact on the organization and now women are engaged in all aspects of the struggle, including the military.

In SWAPO's organizing work, women have played a very important role - both in the public campaigns before 1966 and in underground organizing work after SWAPO was banned. Many women have been active in teaching and as medical aids, and now many are trained militants fighting alongside men in



the guerrilla units. Women have responsibilities at all levels of the organization, even as leaders on the Central Committee and National Executive.

SWAPO also has a Women's League, which is responsible for political education among Namibian women. The chairman of the Women's League, Libertina Appollus, was the first African doctor in Namibia; she has been a leader in SWAPO's social service programs and a very strong example for Namibian women.

HAS THE ACTIVE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE STRUGGLE BROUGHT YOU INTO CONFLICT WITH TRADITIONAL ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES?

Yes, we have had to overcome many traditional attitudes among both men and women. It was very common for people to say: "Men should do the more important tasks and women should stick to domestic duties." The Women's League has done a lot to change this thinking. It has shown many women the importance of their full and equal participation in



the liberation of the country. Among men the old mentality has been harder to eliminate; sometimes they still object to women participating in discussions and meetings, for example. However, the past six years have brought significant changes in the thinking of our people. We have seen the work of our politically motivated women and have learned about the role of women in other liberation struggles. From the Vietnamese, the Koreans, the Chinese and above all from our own experience, we are learning what women are capable of doing and must do if the revolution is to succeed.

## EXTERNAL RELATIONS

THE SOUTH AFRICAN REGIME MAKES EXTENSIVE USE OF THE OLD COLONIAL POLICY OF "DIVIDE AND RULE", GOING SO FAR AS TO CREATE SEPARATE TRIBAL "HOMELANDS" OR BANTUSTANS. HOW DO YOU COUNTERACT THESE ATTEMPTS TO DIVIDE NAMIBIANS AND CREATE PUPPET ADMINISTRATIONS?

First of all, SWAPO has fought very hard against the enemy's propaganda among our people. The racist regime says to one tribe, "You people have been here a long time, but you see, those 'X' people want your land." Then it says to the other people, "You see, those 'Y' people will try to dominate you." And then it goes to a third and says, "Oh, you people are very hard-working - you are not lazy like the others." We counter this colonial propaganda by telling the masses: "These Europeans are always telling us we are different from each other, but look here: there are the Boers from South Africa, the Germans, English, Americans, and as whites they all work together. Now we Namibians are one black nation. Why should we allow ourselves to be divided when this division simply makes it easier for the whites to rule over us. If all our people come together, we can destroy European privilege and take the destiny of our nation into our own hands." And people do understand this.

Of course, South Africa's Bantustan policy is designed to reinforce the division of our people, and SWAPO has always opposed this racist tactic. Okovango, Ovamboland and Caprivi have been proclaimed Bantustans but SWAPO continues to operate freely in these areas, sometimes even attacking their administrative centers. In fact, the Bantustan authorities have not been able to exercise control over the population; they don't have a police force, an army or

even courts. In all these regions there were already well-developed African governmental institutions, but the traditional chiefs - chosen by their own people and consistently anti-colonialist - have been deposed by the South African regime and replaced with puppet administrations headed by government selected "tribal chiefs". Of course, such chiefs have no popular authority. Usually they are former police boys or court interpreters, and their association with the two most hated instruments of oppression in Namibia - the police and the courts - serves to isolate them from the people. In Namibia the racists can get only this kind of collaborator: you find none of the highly educated quislings like in South Africa. The few educated Africans in Namibia have had nothing to do with Bantustans.

HOW DO YOU HANDLE COMPLAINTS FROM THE PEOPLE ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES OF THE APPOINTED PUPPET CHIEFS?

We've got two basic considerations here: on the one hand, we want to achieve unity among all Africans in Namibia and we know the enemy wants Africans to fight Africans; on the other hand, a puppet chief can be a danger to the cause and to the people. So we assess each chief's actions. Some chiefs are simply opportunists working only for their own material gain. They know what SWAPO is doing but fear to act against us. We warn them and watch them carefully, and usually they do no harm. However, some are very dangerous; they have sold out heart and soul to the enemy and are beyond redemption. Chiefs of this kind have been killed by SWAPO guerrillas.

At the height of the last strike, four stooge chiefs who went to sign the sell-out contract with South Africa were killed by SWAPO workers involved in the strike. In each case the decision was made at the grass roots, within the cell, and then sanctioned by the regional leadership and national organs of SWAPO. A political act of this nature requires serious consideration and occurs very rarely. It could damage our cause, for example, if we were to eliminate a chief who simply lacked political consciousness and who could have been won over.

DURING THE STRIKE, SOUTH AFRICA FOR THE FIRST TIME FORMED AFRICAN MILITARY UNITS. HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH THIS ENEMY EFFORT TO HAVE AFRICANS FIGHT AFRICANS?

SWAPO has always made it clear that anyone - whether black, white or brown - who stands in the way of our free-

dom in Namibia will be regarded and treated as an enemy. In the case of the African, Asian and Coloured troops from South Africa (Namibians are never trained for combat) we try to persuade these people to stop helping our enemy. For example, in our regular radio broadcasts into South Africa and Namibia we ask them: "Why do you come to suppress us and side with your own oppressor? You suffer under the same racist tyranny as we do." Then we warn them of what they will face in the combat zones of Namibia. Though they are a small minority of the South African forces in Namibia, these non-white troops have suffered heavy casualties and are increasingly demoralized. This is especially true of the Africans, who are always used in the most dangerous situations - placed at the front of convoys, for example, where our land mines take a heavy toll. Many such Africans have started to question their military role in Namibia and some have deserted.

#### HOW ARE DESERTERS RECEIVED BY SWAPO?

They are interrogated, but never mistreated. It is our policy to reform those who were misguided. Our instruction book for political commissars contains a code of conduct for this, but the experience of the struggle is a good teacher in itself. People come to appreciate human beings; "Never mind if he was the enemy yesterday - he came willingly, his mind is still active and he can be guided along the right path."

#### WHAT ABOUT THE WHITE POPULATION OF NAMIBIA? DO YOU FIND ANY SUPPORT AT ALL AMONG WHITES?

Fascist intolerance and belief in white supremacy are the rule in Namibia - more so even than in South Africa itself. Whites in Namibia, on the whole, are solidly behind the South African regime: the Boers have for generations been brought up in the racism of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa and most German settlers are convinced fascists who fled Germany after the Second World War. Their politics is simply the crude racism of Voerster.

In the big cities of South Africa, especially Johannesburg and Cape Town, you find groups of white liberals, progressives and even communists who stand up and voice their opposition to the racist regime; in Namibia, however, the whites who sympathize with our struggle are very few. It would be very difficult for them to publicly denounce South Africa - much less support SWAPO. However, some of these whites do help in limited ways in our work underground.

PERHAPS YOU COULD DISCUSS THE BASIC DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SWAPO AND THE SOUTH WEST AFRICA NATIONAL UNION (SWANU)?

Well, it has sometimes been written that SWANU launched the national liberation struggle. There is no truth in that. In fact, SWANU has never been a genuine liberation movement. When it was formed, its first president was already set up in England and his few supporters in Namibia quickly followed him abroad. Ever since, SWANU has remained a student organization in exile - mainly in Stockholm, New York and London. They are just not active at all inside Namibia. This is the main difference between SWAPO and SWANU.

As for ideological differences, SWANU has proclaimed that they are "pro-Chinese", and they take the side of China against the Soviet Union. SWAPO, on the other hand, from the beginning has had a close relationship with and support from both China and the European socialist countries. We recognize the differences between these countries but we do not participate in their dispute - for how would our participation in that conflict advance the struggle of the Namibian people? We could not justify to our people taking sides against either the Chinese or the Russians; both are friendly peoples who have contributed in many ways to the success of our struggle. Hence, SWAPO will continue to build friendship and mutual support among all socialist and progressive peoples.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN EXTERNAL SOURCES OF SUPPORT FOR THE STRUGGLE IN NAMIBIA?

First of all, there is strong support and co-operation among all the authentic African liberation movements. We consult with each other, exchange information on our enemy's maneuvers and teach what we have learned from our own particular struggles. For example, last year SWAPO cadre went to Guiné-Bissau to learn from the struggle of our PAIGC comrades-in-arms. We also assist each other in the field: if our guerrillas are forced into Angola, MPLA gives them assistance; if Angolan militants come into Namibia, we do the same. I remember in 1963, for example, I came out of Namibia with a group of Angolan freedom fighters who had been chased by the Portuguese into Namibia. We'd had to hide them for several months before we could get them out.

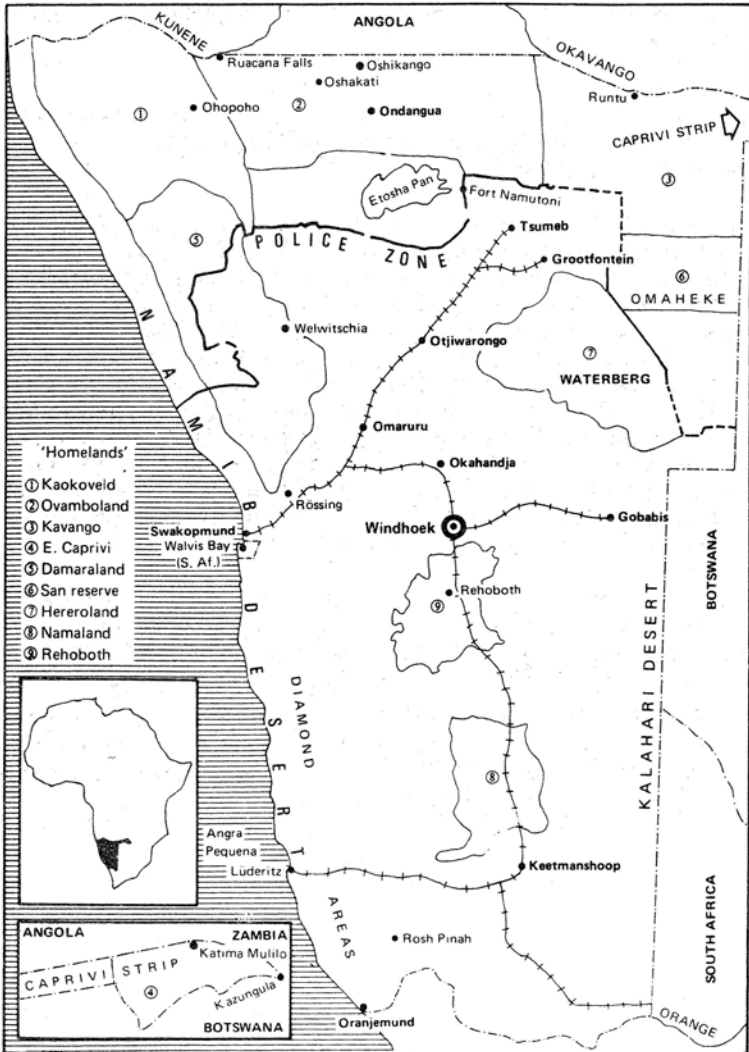
As for material support, we get most of our military equipment and supplies, as well as financial support, through the Organization of African Unity's Liberation Com-

mittee. We receive other material support - medicines, clothing, and so forth - from socialist countries and from certain political parties, organizations and governments in Western Europe. In particular, I might mention the considerable material aid we receive from China and the Soviet Union as well as that from the Swedish government and support organizations.

IN LIGHT OF SWAPO'S COMMITMENT TO THE LIBERATION OF NAMIBIA THROUGH ARMED STRUGGLE, HOW DO YOU VIEW THE CASE OF NAMIBIA AT THE UNITED NATIONS?

Back in 1919 the international community, then organized in the League of Nations, handed our people over to the South African racists. Today we hold the United Nations, legal successor to the League of Nations, responsible for removing the cancer of this South African regime from Namibia. We go to the UN, therefore, to inform the world's peoples about the situation in Namibia and to remind the UN that South Africa continues to exploit our people, ruthlessly and with impunity, while the UN deliberates in New York. Of course, most nations support our struggle, and it is only the few powerful imperialist countries like the United States, Britain and France which still stand in the way of effective UN action against South Africa.

The Namibian people have resolved to become master of their own destiny. We have launched the armed struggle, strikes and civil disobedience, knowing that self-reliance and all-out resistance to South African racist tyranny is the only sure road to complete independence and freedom. We are determined to fight in all ways necessary to become a free people. Thus, the struggle of the Namibian people will be decided inside Namibia.



Map by Okuie

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RICHMOND, B.C. CANADA

22 September 1976

Dear Friends,

Since this interview was published, Andreas Shipanga has been relieved from his position as SWAPO's Director of Information and expelled from the organization. SWAPO, however, still approves of the content of the interview and wants its distribution continued.

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