

ON THE SPEAR STRAIGHT highway to Owamboland the roadside is clotted with tin shacks – the she-beens, the brothels, the *cuca* shops and the homes of the thousands of Namibians whose lives were financed by the South African military presence. This is where the future of Namibia will be decided.

If the incoming independence government cannot reconcile with the people who worked for years to assist Pretoria's illegal occupation of their country, there will be nothing but more strife for the former German colony of South West Africa. One of the many writers who has tried to fathom the conflict-ridden existence of a massive desert with a minute population, concluded: "When the Lord made Namibia he intended it for obscurity."

Alas, this has not been so and the country will not achieve such a deistic designation for years to come. The principal contribution to this sorry state is a tale of unalloyed colonial exploitation, quarrelsome internal politics and ineffectual world attempts to put things right.

South West Africa came into being as part of the European dissection of the African continent in the 19th century. It was Germany's first colony and they ran it with an iron fist. "I know these African tribes," wrote the Prussian general in charge of suppressing a 1904 rebellion,

they are all the same; they respect nothing but force.... To exercise this force with brute terror and even with ferocity was and is my policy. I wipe out rebellious tribes with streams of blood and streams of money. Only by sowing in this way can anything new be grown, anything that is stable.

With Germany's loss of the First World War the territory became a League of Nations responsibility. The British Empire, using its neighbouring South African colony, occupied the land until 1920 when the League of Nations mandate initiated the tortuous modern history of Namibia. South Africa continued to administer the protectorate at such a cost as to have the responsibility described in parliament as a "white elephant" that would be best returned to Germany. Among other things, the South Africans tried to collect a dog ownership tax which the natives resisted as a persecution. "If they are too poor to pay for dogs, why should they keep dogs," was the reasoning of a Pretoria representative.

A series of bush rebellions, inflamed by the callousness of the South African administration, plagued the countryside until the collapse of the League of Nations and the outbreak of the Second World War put the protectorate back in limbo. After the war and emergence of the United Nations, the incorporation of Namibia into South Africa was rejected by the world powers.

A FAMOUS DECLARATION WAS WRITTEN INTO THE UN CHARTER (WHICH would not be fulfilled, in Namibia's case, for twenty-four years) which set out the operating principles for those UN members responsible for the administration of "non-self governing territories": these countries accepted as a "sacred trust the obligation to promote to the utmost ... the well-being of the inhabitants ... to ensure with due respect for the culture of the peoples concerned, their political, economic, social and educational advancement, their just treatment and their protection against abuses." Instead, in 1949, the South African government challenged the UN's authority on the legal grounds that the mandate had lapsed with the demise of the League of Nations.

Despite an International Court of Justice ruling that the UN still held final control, South Africa unilaterally abrogated its responsibility to the

NAMIBIA

rites of passage

*With a UN-supervised election,
Namibians finally get their chance to end a
century of colonial rule.*

BY PATRICK NAGLE

Organization (SWAPO) rose up against this oppression and prosecuted a twenty-three year armed struggle culminating in the planned early November elections for a constituent assembly. This makes Sam Nujoma, the SWAPO leader, another key to the future of Namibia. Despite his years in exile as a spokesman for Namibian independence he is not well-known or clearly-assessed by Western governments. He does have a reputation for being erratic and ill-tempered but his consistency in the Namibian independence cause has never been questioned.

THE UNHAPPY ATTEMPT OF ARMED SWAPO GUERRILLAS TO INFILTRATE Namibia after the commencement of the 1 April UN transition process has never been laid directly at Nujoma's doorstep because he was not at the Angola take-off point when the penetration started. But the damage done to SWAPO's image by a successful South African counter-attack and propaganda campaign can only be measured after voting day.

Few doubt that the SWAPO political party will win the most seats in the November poll, intended to create a broad-based assembly charged with writing a constitution for a national election next spring. The question is whether SWAPO can win two-thirds of the seats in the first vote. If they do, they plan to rewrite the rules of the assembly – which they could do according to the rules of the game – and take over immediately as a de facto government.

Their opposition, which is mainly backed by the residual white population of Namibia, is campaigning strenuously to avoid this eventuality. Now that it is finally up to strength and functioning throughout the country, the UN transition team (UNTAG) is specifically assigned to ensure that this is a "free and fair" election. The whites, backed by the remnants of the South African territorial administration, claim SWAPO is being helped by the UN to rig the vote, while the blacks, including SWAPO, claim that the territorial authorities are intimidating them.

The enabling UN Resolution 435 is not drafted precisely enough to prevent these accusations flying back and forth. Thus an assumption of goodwill on the part of all those involved has not been forthcoming; rather, the political leadership on both sides seem to be competing for the cheap-shot-of-the-year award to be scored off UNTAG.

By comparison, the Lancaster House agreement that turned Rhodesia into Zimbabwe contained a considerable number of checks and balances of both sides. And although Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe has never been happy with some elements of Lancaster House, he has scrupulously adhered to the letter of its provisions, to the benefit of his country through continued international economic and military assistance.

IF THE NAMIBIAN PROTAGONISTS CANNOT OVERCOME THEIR GHASTLY HISTORY and present a united country to the world, their only future is as a questionable charity case. For a start, South Africa is withdrawing the subsidies that have propped up Namibia for more than a decade. The

mandate and started governing Namibia as a territory of its own. The growth of the *apartheid* society in South Africa and its extension into Namibia led to Pretoria's estrangement from world opinion. In 1966, the UN declared South Africa had disavowed its mandate, making its presence an illegal occupation. In response, Pretoria created white economic areas and black homelands that divided the country along racial lines and enforced the division with police and military garrisons.

The South West Africa Peoples