CCK-8

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

In the Twilight (Zone) of Apartheid: Walvis Bay

Casey C. Kelso
Somewhere between Namibia,
Botswana, and Zimbabwe
May 15, 1992

Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

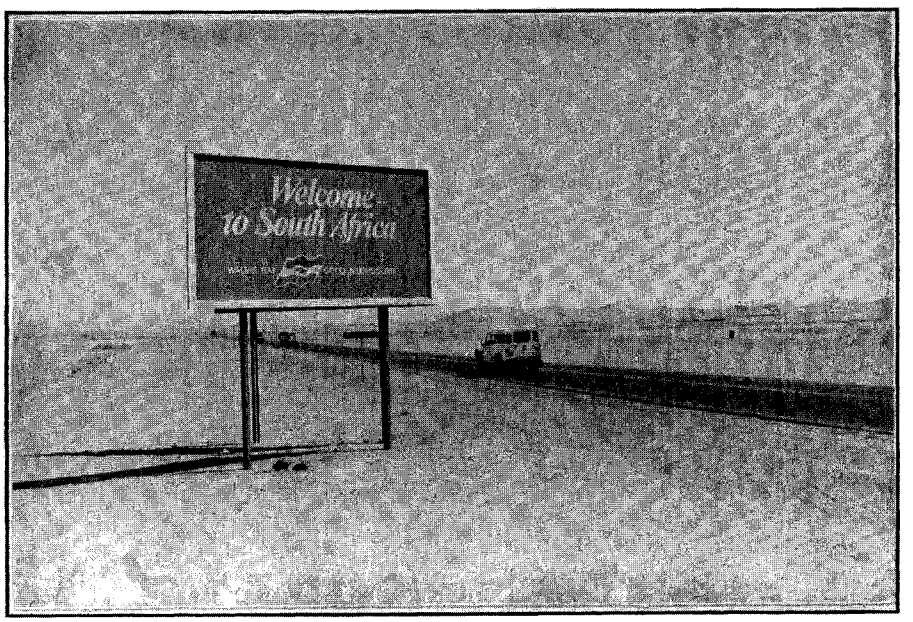
Dear Peter:

My first glimpse of Walvis Bay was a menacing black mirage on the horizon of a flat plain of cinders lacking any vertical shape, living or inanimate. My wife, Bobbie Jo, and I had driven our Toyota all day through this waterless expanse before I saw the dense, dark mist concealing the port city. It was easy to spot after the monotony of the Namib Desert, where I had expected a cactus or two. Yet as we followed the unpaved track that had jumped the flinty mountains to the east we had found only boulders, cobbles and gravel in descending order. True, there were some weeds and a few uncompromising Camel Thorn trees along the dry bed of the Kuiseb River where we camped the previous evening. But those few struggling plants only emphasized in ominous contrast the lifeless reach of the desert. No animals. No birds. Not even insects. On this same route last month, an American died in a crash when her Landrover burst a front wheel and flipped over. Although scared by the idea of wrecking in this Death Valley look-alike, I kept involuntarily speeding up. I wanted to get across the sun-burnt wasteland.

In an effort to cool off my rising frustration, I had turned on the car's air conditioner, which rarely gets used because of the twinge of guilt I usually feel about being so luxurious. An air conditioner is like a hair dryer or non-dairy coffee "whitener": a meaningless extra that could be left out for the sake of simplicity. Worse, it's an artificial indulgence that separates a person from the direct perception of reality, whether it's black-coffee bitterness or a headache-hot day. The sun, however, seemed to have found an ozone hole in a bull's eye right over our heads. I was uncomfortably aware that I sat on a plastic seat inside a metal vehicle riding on rubber wheels. I thought the whole thing, myself included, might melt at any moment. But the engine began to whine from the extra load, while the fan expelled only a warm wheezy breath, so the air conditioner went off and the windows went back down to get the dusty breeze on our faces again. That was when I saw it.

Casey Kelso is a fellow of the Institute studying the societies, economies and agricultural systems of Southern Africa.

After continuously driving for six hours due west, I had slowed the car down as we crested a small hill. At the far edge of this overheated world hovered a black smudge, from whence came a cool wind off the unseen ocean. It wasn't Walvis Bay itself; just a foreshadowing of the important regional port. That did it, though. Accelerator to the floor, I rocketed the car along the gravel until the wheel shimmied from the speed. We ground to a halt another hour later at a South African military checkpoint. The landscape had changed. Until then, a tan monochrome of rubble lay scattered on either side of the runway-straight gravel road. But after getting our passports stamped by the border guards and driving on, great red sand dunes loomed over us as they marched to the sea. Towering 50 or 60 feet over the road, the dunes half-buried an old railway track laid down at the turn of the century. With a bump the car was back onto a paved road and the mirage thickened into a black cloud bank in the sky. We were still in the bright afternoon sun, while the countryside ahead lay in mist and shadows. At the same time, the political obscurity also seemed to thicken as we passed a huge billboard. "Welcome to South Africa," the sign read, "Walvis Bay, Good Neighbors."



Is this a sign of welcome or warning?

Walvis Bay can be considered the last surviving artifact of an earlier era of colonial divide-and-rule. South Africa administered Walvis Bay as a part of Namibia for 55 years until it became clear that Namibia, the unofficial "fifth province," would become independent. Then, South Africa annexed this strategic port in 1977 to its Cape Province, more than 600 miles away from its borders, to create its own Guantánamo Bay. The United Nations condemned the land grab, as it continued to condemn South Africa's illegal occupation of Namibia after the world body revoked the racist regime's mandate to administer the territory. South Africa, however, saw the strategic importance of Walvis Bay. The continued control of the only deep-water port on Namibia's 700-mile Atlantic coastline

gives South Africa an economic stranglehold on Namibia and a strategic military base deep within its neighbor's territory.

Upon gaining independence in 1990, Namibia's new government enshrined in the constitution a claim to **all** its territory, including Walvis Bay and the adjacent offshore islands. Aware of the potentially lethal choke-point in South African hands, however, the Namibians later backed down on initial demands for immediate reintegration of the port. Instead, secret negotiations have dragged on for months concerning "joint administration."

Walvis Bay will remain in a nebulous political purgatory for some time to come. In the apparent twilight of apartheid, Walvis Bay seems likely to be returned to Namibia someday. But the recent lifting of international sanctions has eliminated all pressure on South Africa to relinquish control of Namibia's key port. And while liberalizations continue apace in South Africa, the black Namibian population living and working in Walvis Bay remains a hostage to rule by a conservative white population. Some right-wing whites who still live in Namibia point to Walvis Bay as the home of unrepentant bigots who migrated to the enclave at the advent of black majority rule. Discussion about reunifying Walvis Bay with Namibia dredges up angry racism from white residents and bitter resentment from blacks against the continuing colonialism. The issue will not be solved simply, nor soon, for the world has chosen to forget about the continuing injustice that passes for day-to-day life in Walvis Bay.

A poor judge of humanity

I'm chagrined to admit why I was so keen to visit Walvis Bay. Yes, there's the tragedy in the continuing racially inspired oppression that makes the Namibians' lives hellish, and this injustice should be exposed to an international audience. And true, the importance of the port will suddenly be spotlighted in the next few months when thousands of tons of food assistance is shipped through Walvis Bay on its way to Zambia. So as a writer about "food systems" in southern Africa, I needed to see first hand the port facilities that will handle the critically needed drought relief aid. But beneath these good reasons, there lurked an adventuresome motive: I wanted to meet an out-in-out violent white supremacist, of the ilk that first inspired apartheid and now swears to fight to the bitter end against racial equality. I wanted to talk to such a person and try to understand the suicidal bigotry that could end in the blood-soaked destruction of South Africa. I wanted a close look at pure, extreme racism.

I found it. Not in some Neo-Nazi protest march, nor on a secret shooting range for paramilitary troops, though Walvis Bay has hosted both. I conversed with the epitome of racial hatred while sipping tea in the comfortable living room of a middle-class house. Although prepared, the malice still shocked me.

"You can't take human being settlers and throw them together with non-human individuals and expect them to build one nation," said Paul Van Staden, a medical doctor practicing in Walvis Bay. "The Americans did the right thing. They wiped them [the Indians] out. But in South Africa, the Boers moved hand-in-hand and took their bibles and prayed to them and sang to the blacks. And look what happened: We still have these primitives." Bobbie Jo and I exchanged incredulous looks. Quicker to regain her professional composure than me, Bobbie reminded the doctor that it wasn't wise to joke in front of journalists. The doctor's wife tried to clarify her husband's bluntness. "They're not brought up like us," she said. "They're not educated, not civilized." The doctor interrupted her: "They are not human, that's what."

We had arrived at Van Staden's house after being referred by the former leader of the Namibian branch of the ultra-right South African terrorist group, the **Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging.** The AWB believes in reviving the old Boer republics; violently combating anybody considered to be an enemy of the state, including black nationalists, capitalists, marxists, liberals and humanists; and promoting a far-right wing Protestantism. Speaking to me in Windhoek, the former AWB idealogue said Van Staden would be the person to contact in Walvis Bay to find the extreme right.

Van Staden was cagey about admitting his link to the AWB. Living in a city that will eventually be ruled by a black majority, I would be secretive, too. Yet in the midst of talking about his political affiliations and beliefs, there was a telling slip. After a brief interruption, the doctor resumed the conversation with the query: "Where were we? Oh yes, the AWB."

He did admit to leading the Walvis Bay branch of the Conservative Party, a South African right-wing political group known to promote dual membership in both its organization and in the AWB. The Conservative Party was formed in 1982, after leader Dr. Andries Treurnicht was expelled from the ruling National Party for opposing its mild, cosmetic reforms. This is the same party that recently expelled a South African parliament member from its ranks for supporting negotiations with the African National Congress. A few weeks later, the CP politician considered too leftist by his party leadership was arrested in connection with the dynamiting of a racially mixed school for children of ANC members.

During the March referendum that asked South Africa's white electorate if it supported negotiating a new constitution with the ANC, the Conservative Party unsuccessfully campaigned for a "no" vote. The Conservatives reject all negotiations, proposing instead a confederation of separate states for the various races, with South Africa's five million whites having the biggest nation alongside the various states for some 30 million blacks. Van Staden headed up the party's vigorous canvassing of Walvis Bay.

After moving from Pretoria to Namibia ten years ago, Van Staden abandoned his medical practice at Namibian independence to relocate again, this time to Walvis Bay. He admits that joint South African-Namibian administration of the port town appears inevitable, with integration in three to five years. Reunified Namibia will then slip into chaos until the whites take back power because, Van Staden said, blacks are not capable of governing a country. "Eventually, someday, we'll be coming back to the AWB," he predicted. In the short-term, Van Staden does not foresee violent resistance from whites here to Namibian rule. "What sense is there in doing anything here? We haven't got the backing because people are cowards nowadays. They won't stand up and fight. They'll accept defeat, like in South West Africa."

The colonial history

A South African poet who has taught at the university in Namibia since 1979 wrote an ironic yet compassionate poem about Walvis Bay:

Britain, the Victorian sexist, took her.
trawlers penetrated the only vagina
in a thousand miles.
believing her womb was desert
they withdrew from commitment
to the post-climactic clamp of a land
that for her own sake
could have been possessed.
passed on in time
to another chauvinist
who dressed her luridly
in orange white and blue
and kept her as mistress of the Namib,
herself unkept, corseted in whale bone,
sweating under arm in the acrid east wind,
dominated by males drinking,
swearing loyalty before they left
to drop their sperm of fish
in other wombs.
alone she approaches menopause,
her treasures hidden
beneath a modesty of desert.

(From "Bordering," a collection of poems by Dorian Haarhoff.)

This melancholy poem can be cryptic unless you know the history of ambivalence by the western colonial powers toward Walvis Bay. As a large and sheltered harbor, the bay was a natural stopping point for explorers, traders and missionaries. Portuguese mariners explored the western coast of Africa in the 15th century, striking further and further south until Diego Cao erected a cross to commemorate his landing in 1485 at what is

still known as Cape Cross, about one hundred miles north of Walvis Bay. Two years later, Bartholomeu Dias was returning from his explorations in search of a trade route to India when he landed in the bay and named it Golfo de Santa Maria de Conceicao.

The Dutch East India Company established an outpost in the mid-seventeenth century at the Cape (later to become South Africa) for their ships traveling to and from the Far East. Company expeditions visited Walvis Bay in search of local trade, but sent back negative reports about unfriendly natives. In 1784, American, British and French whalers were making use of the bay while hunting sperm whales along the coast, calling the place "Bahia de Baleas" (Bay of Whales) or Walfische Baye. They found the indigenous Nama-speaking people, who inhabited the area, gathering food from the abundant marine life and hunting seals.

Proliferating rumors reached the Cape of vast herds of cattle and game and rich deposits of gold and copper to be found north of the Orange River, which forms the modern-day boundary between Namibia and South Africa. After British expeditions in 1784 and 1786, the Dutch realized the disadvantage of a foreign power lodging a sweeping claim. They hastily dispatched Captain F. R. Duminy in his ship to set up a "stone of possession" at the bay in 1793. The halfhearted Dutch authority didn't last long. Two years later, England raced to appropriate the Cape of Good Hope. France had invaded Holland, so Britain feared the French would gain control of the sea route to India. Upon seizing the Dutch colony in the south, the British dispatched Captain J. Alexander to Walvis Bay to take possession of the area with ridiculous formality. The sea captain landed, raised the British flag, fired three volleys of gunshots and turned over some soil with a shovel. Then he left. That performance, worthy of a Monty Python sketch, was judged inadequate for a claim of sovereignty, according to the prevailing international laws of the time.

For the next 73 years, the British remained lukewarm about solidifying their shaky claim to the area. They acted like a "salad dog," as my mother would say. A dog may refuse to eat the salad dumped in his bowl, but he will growl at any other dog that approaches. While the English recognized the strategic importance of Walvis Bay itself, the colonial empire was preoccupied by political problems in the Cape colony. Even a war centered around Walvis Bay provoked only desultory interest. The white traders and the missionary societies -- main suppliers of guns and ammunition to the locals -- raised an army and began a war between the Herero tribe and another powerful, warlike Namibian ethnic group. The missions wanted the less pliable ethnic group subdued, while the traders wanted free access to a huge territory where profits could be made bartering ammunition for ivory, ostrich feathers and livestock. Although the missionaries publicized the conflict as the "Herero War of Liberation," in the hopes of finding British or German sponsorship, the Herero showed

indifferent support and only a minority participated, as paid mercenaries. The Cape's colonial governor finally settled the war, but reiterated the British empire's unwillingness to be involved with anything but the immediate area around the bay. Finally, in 1878, Captain Richard Dyer hoisted the Union Jack over Walvis Bay. Fears concerning the German colonial expansion into adjacent territories prompted that belated confirmation of sovereignty. Not wanting involvement in the interior, however, Britain stricly instructed Dyer to annex only the Walvis Bay enclave and sufficient domain to ensure fresh water supplies.

The reference to "orange white and blue" in the poem above refers to the South African Cape colony's colors. Britain found administration and enforcement of law and order difficult in the remote possession, so control passed to the Cape in 1884. In 1910, the four British colonies of the Cape, Natal, Transvaal and Orange River merged into the Union of South Africa. As a possession of the Cape colony, Walvis Bay was included in the package. The port had the same status as "native lands," so its laws were decreed without representation in the Union parliament.

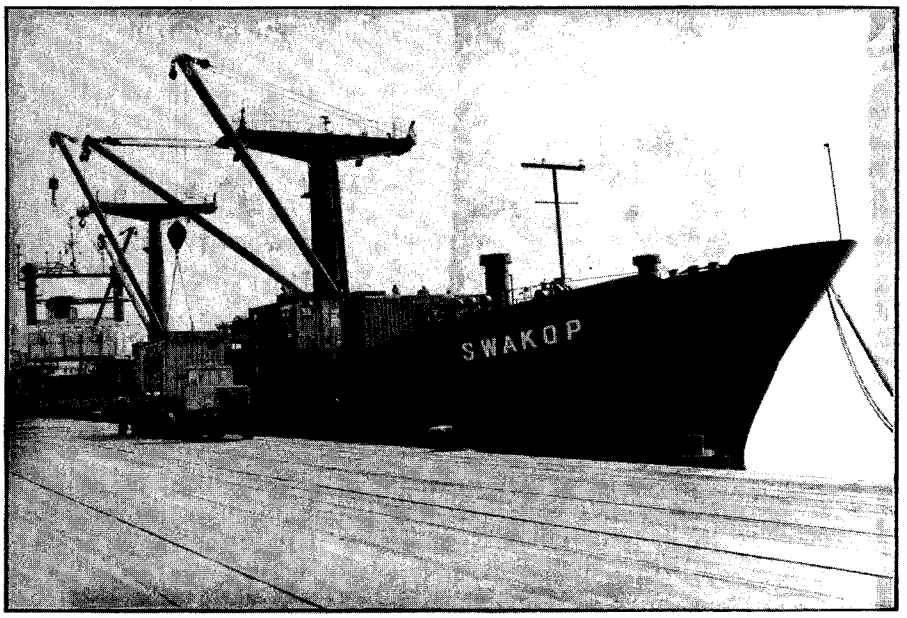
After German defeat in World War I, South Africa took control of Namibia under the League of Nations mandate. Formal administration of Walvis Bay was later transferred yet again, this time from the Cape province of South Africa to Namibia, under the South West Africa Affairs Act of 1922. Walvis Bay then functioned as an integral part of Namibia until 1977, when talks had begun to end the guerilla war fought by the South West African People's Organisation against South African troops in Namibia. The flurry of negotiations showed signs of bearing fruit, so South Africa swiftly annexed the bay to the Cape. In trying to turn back the clock in 1977, South African Prime Minister John Vorster declared: "There are people in South West Africa, and in the outside world in particular, who adopt the standpoint that Walvis Bay belongs to South West Africa. I do not want there to be any misunderstanding whatsoever about this. Walvis Bay belongs to South Africa."

The United Nations declared the annexure "null and void" and confirmed the "territorial integrity and unity of Namibia." South Africa continued to ignore the world body. When peace talks deadlocked over the Walvis Bay issue, the Contact Group of Western Nations (the United States, Britain, France, West Germany and Canada) smoothed the way for an eventual settlement by deferring discussion on the disputed territory until after independence in 1990. The United Nations reaffirmed its stance, calling for early reintegration of the port in Resolution 432.

What's at stake?

A damp and run-down little town set off by itself on the barren Namibian coast, Walvis Bay doesn't look that important.

The streets of the mist-shrouded city of 28,000 people are laid out in a simple grid, accommodating boxlike houses and the decrepit canneries that create a choking rotten-fish smell permeating the town. Yet Walvis Bay is Namibia's economic gateway and its key to political independence. With eight deep-water berths, it is the fifth largest port in southern Africa and handles 90 percent of Namibia's exports. **All** of mineral-rich Namibia's shipments of nickel, copper, lead and uranium go through this port. Walvis Bay is also the center of Namibia's fishing industry, the second largest contributor to the economy after mining. And the massive oil storage tanks in the enclave hold 90 percent of Namibia's fuel supply. The country's economic security rests on foreign soil!



The Walvis Bay port stays busy all day.

South Africa used Walvis Bay as a beachhead since the 1960s in the invasion of Angola and for military operations in Namibia. All three branches of the South African Defense Force -- the army, navy and air force -- established bases inside the enclave. During the last years of the war for Namibian independence, the SADF used Walvis Bay as the training center for black Namibians conscripted into the South West Africa Territorial Forces and the notorious counter-insurgency unit **Koevoet**, or "crowbar." In 1989 and 1990, there was a flurry of military development as the South Africans spent over US $13 million to develop military infrastructure and larger bases on a more permanent foundation there. A shift in policy appeared this February, however, when the last major unit was sent home in a military scaledown. While Commando and Cadet detachments remain, the commanding general announced that the new battalion headquarters in Walvis Bay had become "superfluous."

The clanking of tanks has ceased, but the rumble of locomotives and the clashing of cargo on the docks still makes a steady din that underlies all activity in Walvis Bay. The port

sees about a thousand ships dock each year and handles approximately one million tons of cargo annually, although Portnet -- the South African port authority -- will not reveal exact figures. Portnet's tonnage statistics are available for Durban, Capetown or its four other ports, but a spokesman wouldn't explain why he was forbidden to discuss Walvis Bay exports. The restriction was recently imposed, he added.

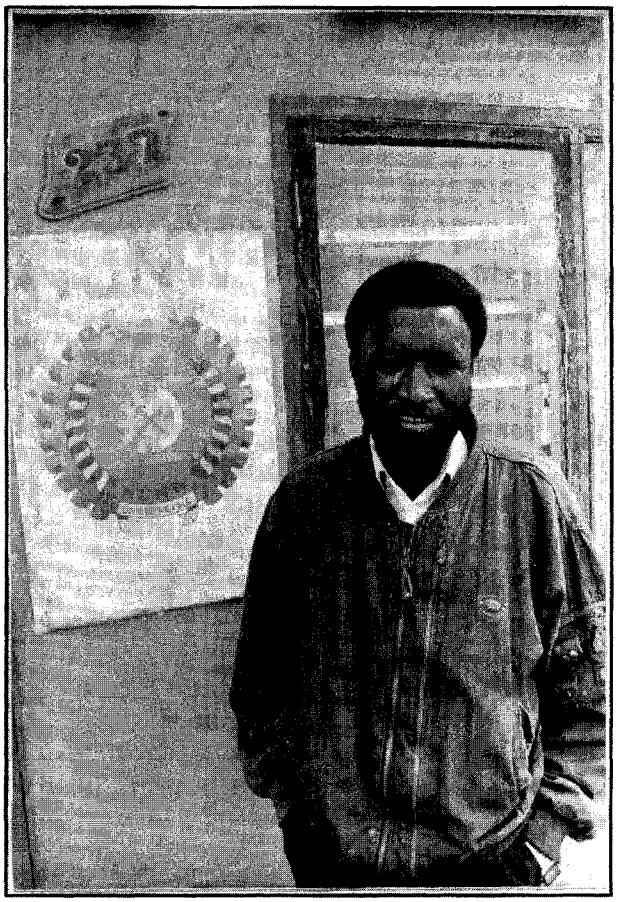
Of the 378 employees working at the official harbor cargo facilities, almost 80 percent are Namibians. Ten times that number work at the private port facilities, like the conveyor belt for loading ores, the sulfuric acid terminal, the cold storage shed for fish, the fish oil tanks or the various private canneries that send plumes of smoke across the skyline. Hundreds of private fishing boats, pulling catches from the shallow waters eight to 10 miles offshore, dock at the wharves to feed the fish factories. The workers -- from the fishermen outside, untwisting their nets, to the factory workers inside -- are Namibian citizens who are technically in a foreign land.

As a center for migrant labor since the 1950s, thousands of men come to Walvis Bay each year from Ovambo in northern Namibia to work in the canning factories and fish processing plants. Like any other city under apartheid rule, Walvis Bay has "locations" far from the downtown civic center for the non-whites. For blacks, each evening means a long trek out to Kuisebmond, the black town that is home to 10,000 people. Really, the word "town" does not apply, since the depressing place has all the warmth of a prison cell block. While there are no barbed-wire fences, there are no signs to tell a motorist how to get to Kuisebmond. There are no stores, forcing blacks to spend their money in the white city they are unwelcome to live inside. No street signs, no stoplights. Nothing to signify this is a community, instead of a concentration camp. Most residents have been working in the fishing factories for years, spending more time in the port city than in Namibia. Yet they must present their documents to border guards when returning to Walvis Bay from visiting family in Namibia. A municipal compound that houses thousands of seasonal workers sits in the middle of the town. Up to 16 men share one sleeping room in the jail-like complex, bedding down on concrete bunks. Outside the compound, sleeping arrangements aren't much better. Endless rows of two-room homes line narrow, dirty streets.

On one such street, a corner house hosts the National Union of Namibian Workers, an umbrella group coordinating efforts to organize the workers to demand better wages and safer working conditions. Inside, a small "apartheid-free zone" has been created. Posters proclaim populist slogans, like "The Union is where the workers are" and "Remember the first bullet! Celebrate Namibia Day." Since the trade union is technically on South African soil, many companies refuse to recognize its negotiators. Initially, police arrested the organizers and escorted them out

of Walvis Bay. They have made headway, but the situation is still miserable. "The companies say the union is illegal, so it's very difficult to organize," said Jonas Lukas, the western region organizer for the Metal and Allied Namibian Workers' Union. "Most people want unification and are not in favor of joint administration. We want to be with Namibia now."

In the absence of any shops, any beer halls or recreation facilities, the union office has become a kind of community center where people come to seek help on problems that affect their daily lives. Some workers are fired without notice or without payment of their salary, others are employed with contracts and end up being cheated on wages. The day before my visit to the unionists, a worker was badly beaten with a plastic bucket by his foreman. Last week, an injured man arrived after an employer beat him with fists, permanently damaging the man's hearing. Earlier this month, a demolition crew cutting apart a loading crane on a dock scattered when the support structure collapsed. One man drowned when he was knocked into the sea, while another remains hospitalized. The list of complaints is never-ending, while the solution seems obvious.



Jonas Lukas outside the union office.

"You get times when you don't sleep, you just think God must help and we must get our place back," said George Gavanga, who shares the office with Lukas. Gavanga is the branch educator for the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union, another smaller union helping workmen in the canneries. "Apartheid is always there, apartheid is not something which dies in a day, it takes decades," Gavanga said. "Here it has not even yet started to die -- it is still alive." Most Namibians in Walvis Bay don't understand why it's taking so long for the enclave to be reunited with Namibia, according to Gavanga. Joint administration is just a delaying tactic by South Africa to prolong discussions and create confusion, he said. "It's not necessary for Walvis Bay to

have a joint administration, it should be administered by Namibia, [for] it is part of Namibia."

The `big fish' swim the deepest

While the two governments debate over joint authority, local white businessmen and politicians are taking matters into their own hands to secure their position in the enclave as the political situation changes. As in South Africa, apartheid has undergone a chameleon-like change in Walvis Bay to disguise its operation behind the veneer of legality and "consensus."

"Apartheid has been done away with, while we're looking at the remnants of apartheid here in Walvis Bay," said Ronald "Buddy" Bramwell, the white mayor of Walvis Bay. As managing director of Etosha Fishing Corporation, one of the larger canneries in the enclave, Bramwell is in a perfect position to explain how the old system adapts to a new reality.

At independence, Namibia declared a 200-mile offshore Economic Exclusion Zone, effectively taking control of the fishing industry. Now that Namibia controls the waters and who fishes them, profit-making for a company depends on a Namibian image. When quotas for fishing were only given to Namibian companies, to promote local industry, Etosha was one of many Walvis Bay companies to "Namibianize." They found Namibian investors to buy up a majority share of stock to allow registration as a true Namibian company. Etosha is now 55 percent Namibian owned and 45 percent South African, though one can guess who is in control. "We wouldn't get a government quota to fish if we didn't Namibianize," Bramwell said. "I see a future in fishing in Walvis Bay, so I prefer 45 percent of something rather than 100 percent of nothing, which is what would have happened if we didn't get Namibians in."

The two largest consortiums that dominate Namibia's inshore fisheries, Namfish and Namsea, are most likely South African controlled. While the group of companies were purchased by Norwegians and Americans, ostensibly removing them from South African corporate parentage, most experts in the industry say the ballast behind the two "big fish" lies in the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. A Namibian commission of inquiry into the fishing industry found that many Namibians who were allocated a quota of thousands of tons of fish illegally sold their licenses to South African interests. Some existed on paper, but had no boats. Other tiny local firms ballooned quickly with "newly licensed" chartered vessels from a foreign fleet Namibia tried to keep out.

Another example of apparent adaption that camouflages deception is the sudden interest in working out a local version of "joint administration." The white city council has called for a single unified city government to administer the entire

territory. Blacks, whites and colored could all sit on the council or even become mayor, they say.

Throughout South Africa, in what is touted as a major political reform, a new law has been promulgated to allow cities to combine colored and black township authorities with the local white governments into a central municipality. Only two South African cities have taken a half-step towards political integration, deciding to include coloreds but exclude blacks. At least they were honest. In February, Walvis Bay suddenly decided to also merge into a unified city government to give "minorities" a say in running the show. The controversial move comes at a time when international negotiations continue over its status, so something smells fishy in Walvis Bay. But the mayor insists the exercise is part of the spirit of reconciliation between the races. "Where we're sitting now at the negotiating forum, we want to find out how we can all sit on a unified body," Bramwell said. "We have to thrash out how many wards there will be, how many councilors will sit on the body, and what voting qualifications are. This all has to be by 'consensus.' That's the key word."

I did not realize the enormity of the mayor's fraud until I spoke with Wilfried Emvula, the director of the Legal Assistance Centre in Kuisebmond. Emvula became grim when I read out loud from my notes about Bramwell's glowing description of plans to integrate the city council. He told me that Bramwell had left out an important point. The qualifications for voting to elect the integrated governing body would depend upon owning a home, possessing 15,000 to 35,000 Rand in assets, or living for many years in Walvis Bay. "Only since 1986 could black people buy and own their own houses, so 90 percent of us rent," Emvula said. "The town council was already considering these proposals and amended them first, before they have come to us at the forum." Another trick is in defining the voting wards by economics, instead of population. Some sections of the enclave -- the white downtown area -- have very valuable property; obviously, the black and colored townships are less affluent but more populated. It's an easy guess which wards will have a numerical superiority on the "unified municipality." Namibian authorities have issued a harshly worded protest note to the South Africans about the plan.

Emvula is also the only black citizen of Walvis Bay to attend the secret meetings between Namibia and South Africa on the fate of Walvis Bay. Emvula said the secrecy is to allow South Africa to compromise in private while over time preparing the white public to accept such a move. "They keep the talks secret so as not to embarrass voters, because at first the government said they would never, never negotiate on Walvis Bay," he said.

If that's what it takes, so be it. But after the secret deal is signed, at what cost will it be to Namibia?

Sincerely,

Received in Hanover, June 26, 1992