

REPORT OF FR. GERARD HEIMERICKX O.M.I. ON A VISIT TO SWAPO CAMPS IN ANGOLA

From 20 July to 21 August 1987 I was in Angola to visit the Swapo camps of the Province Quanza-Sul. There were two of us: the Anglican Ovambopriest Haikali and myself. For the whole duration of our visit in Angola, Swapo had put a Landcruiser Stationwaggon with driver at our disposal, and they also paid all our costs. Without this help, in particular the vehicle, our trip would have been useless.

On account of the danger of UNITA attacks we had, from Luanda onwards, to travel 300km in military convoy over a very bad and worn-out main road and it is only in the evening at 9 p.m. that we arrived at the central camp. In Quanza-Sul 45000 Namibians live in 19 centres within a area of about 50 km diameter. The area used to be a rich coffee-growing area. One keeps driving through large plantations: mostly oil palms, and below them coffee shrubs. Before 1975 it was one of the most prosperous regions of Angola, but the rich left the country in a hurry and now there are only very few local Angolans living here. Most houses are empty and the plantations appear very neglected.

The Namibians have strict instruction not to touch trees or shrubs. That is a matter for the Angolans. Once in a while one does meet people doing this work.

Our camps are situated in the midst of all this. They are not fenced in and vary in size. Some are as far as 30 km from the centre. The logistics must function properly: in our convoy we had transported 20 tons of fish and meat, and as we travelled around, these were distributed very rapidly to the most distant corners. Indeed, everywhere one could smell the smell of roasting meat and the aroma of fish drying in the sun.

Each one of the 19 centres has its own clinic, attached to two hospitals and one large maternity. Namibian medical doctors, trained in Finland and Eastern Europe, are working in these, as well as for the moment three Finnish Doctors.

Several camps have their own electricity generating unit.

The red clay soil creates serious transport problems during the rainy season. Even at the end of the dry season, the roads were practically unpassable. The dust colors the palms and coffee-bushes along the road in a dark red hue.

In all the camps people are busy making clay bricks for building houses. Whoever builds a house receives the roofing material gratis: rafter material and corrugated iron sheets. I have the impression that soon enough one will no longer come across tents or primitive grass huts. Everywhere the Namibians give an impression of health and fitness. In three centres that we visited, large farms have been set up, and they produce most of the food for all the 45000, in particular maize, sorghum and vegetables. All the rest must come from Luanda. In this sense, Angola is in a better situation than Zambia: Angola has seaports, which Zambia lacks.

In some centres the water supply is still a problem. In the beginning, water was supplied by means of large tanker trucks, and this is still the case in some places. But even where there are boreholes and pumps, water is still scarce. However all these

improvements are dependent on the humanitarian help that Swapo receives, and I would be happy if I could find some organizations that would be able and ready to help.

During the time we were there, I was able to celebrate the Eucharist in 12 of the camps and the people were absolutely free to leave their work for this purpose. Their praying and singing indicated that they do it regularly also among themselves, i.e. that they have Sunday services without the presence of a priest. Some had brought along a prayerbook or a Bible.

In addition to the camps in Quanza-Sul, there are many other Swapo centres in Angola: there are altogether 75000 Namibians in Angola.

Unfortunately, for the whole pastoral work in all the camps together, there are only 2 old evangelical pastors, who are respectively 87 and 62 years old. May the Lord keep them for many years to come, because they do sterling work. However, they have only one car together at their disposal for trips even beyond Quanza-Sul! (Who would like to donate a second vehicle for the Swapocamps in Angola? It is really very, very necessary!) These two elderly men take care of the Protestants, Catholics and Anglicans and I am very grateful to them. Ecumenism is the only solution in our situation.

There are also some elderly lay people committed for religious work, giving instruction and convincing parents to have their children baptized. This is how, apart from the Eucharists, I baptized 252 persons, mostly babies, in the whole Quanza-Sul.

I did not have much time to study the life in the camps: I was chiefly concerned with the people, with establishing contact with them.

It was the time of the school holidays. Thus I could only see the school buildings: all prefabricated in scandinavian style. There were so many large school buildings in the various places that I did not have the possibility of counting them all: a large percentage of the Namibian refugees are youth and children. The hated Bantu-Education has provoked, since 1974, a real exodus among school children and new groups are added to them even now. You may guess, but only once, where all the numerous babies come from!!!

I visited some projects such as a shoe factory, a large tailoring workshop (in which over 50 pedal-operated sewing machines are constantly in operation), a weaving centre (started by two Dutch girls, but now run by the local people themselves), some hospitals and an enormous maternity. I seem to have understood that the beautiful hospital buildings, all of them permanent structures were a gift from Italy and more particularly from the city of Rome. I had the impression that in them everything was spick and span and that real and serious work was done there. No wonder! The large central hospital is directed by a lady medical assitant, who had received her first formation in our mission hospital at Otshikuku and who had worked there for many years. The second Hospital, Cabuta, is directed by a matron who comes from our mission at Okatana. At all the larger health centres, I met former nurses from my mission in Otshikuku. There are also a few at the military hospitals at the front.

In the Central Hospital I also met a young Ovambo woman who

had trained as a dentist in the German Democratic Republic. Unfortunately, for lack of a drill and other necessary material, she can only perform extractions and temporary fillings. After that the patient has to go with a convoy to Luanda, 300km there and 300km back, in the hope that they can help him further. This is by no means certain, because there too all kind of things are lacking. Our dentist told me that she could perform all types of treatments, if only she had the necessary equipment and material. It is not so urgent to make false teeth, but it would already be a great help if she could drill and do fillings. Who will help here? Is there somewhere a dentist who still has a usable but unused drill? The hospital has 220 volt electricity supply.

One very well equipped camp is the rehabilitation centre. It consists of about 10 spacious buildings in which war invalids and civilians who were crippled by South African bullets (cf. Cassinga 4th May 1978) are given appropriate training. Not only are they provided with false limbs, but they are also trained in manual skills, braille lessons for the blind and training in sign language for those whose vocal cords have been severed. There too, as everywhere, I met people I knew, amputated, deaf, blind or dumb. The sacrifices that Namibia must make for her freedom are terrible. In addition there are, apparently, already 11000 dead, and this from a total population of at most 1,5 million! And who will count the civilians who are killed by the South African occupation forces in the North of Namibia? There are only 30 mentally disturbed in Quanza-Sul, but there are others in the other camps. I am told they are more numerous as one comes nearer to the front area.

My overall impression of the Quanza-Sul camps is very good. The organisation has to be good, otherwise the people in the distant centres would not be satisfied. All seem generally in good form, in good mood and busy studying something or applying what they have learned. Everywhere people are hard at work. They have one ideal: to liberate Namibia and to rebuild it. It is a gigantic community, living among themselves without any money. The Angolan money is so worthless that one can do literally nothing with it. Moreover, nowhere in any Swapo camp did I come across a single shop.

Undoubtedly Swapo is socialist. This is not surprising after the experience they made as Blacks living together in a capitalist and colonial situation, from which they escaped? Moreover very many have been trained in Cuba, in Eastern Europe and in African socialist countries. In the West most of them would not have been able to afford an education.

Over and over again I had to think of the passages in the Acts of the Apostles, chap. 2 and 4:

" They ...had everything in common. What they received was distributed among those who needed it. They were of one mind and nobody spoke of personal property: everything was in common. There was none among them who was in need..."

I saw this realised in the Swapo camps of Angola more than anywhere else in my life. The motivations are socialistic, but the facts are the same as in the primitive Church. How beautiful if this spirit could be maintained in an independent Namibia!

After our return to Luanda we were invited by the black

Cardinal of Luanda, who would like to meet Swapo some time. Toivo ya Toivo, the General Secretary of Swapo came with us and an interesting conversation between him and the cardinal ensued. It was a conversation between two Africans: two old foxes, both 63 years old, who had heard of each other and who could now smell each other out more closely. The cardinal had been banned from Angola to Portugal for 10 years during the Angolan war of independence. Toivo sat for almost 20 years on Robben Island in prison for Namibia. They spoke very freely and clearly and the cardinal warned to stay independent from both Russians and Americans, because otherwise freedom and independence are gone.

The Apostolic Delegate too invited Toivo and us to a meal. Here too the conversation was open and friendly, with many questions on both sides and with the explicitly stated hope, that the contacts may be maintained and deepened.

To end it all there were invitations: the Apostolic Delegate is welcome to visit a Swapo camp, and Toivo was invited to meet the pope some time, in Rome. Some preliminary enquiries were made also about the possibility of building a large church in the Central camp of Quanza-Sul, and the request for this came from Swapo.

Gerrard Heimerickx O.M.I.
Missionary Oblates
Box 320009 Woodlands
LUSAKA, Zambia

(translation E. Roch)

Collection Number: AG1977

END CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN (ECC)

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive

Location:- Johannesburg

©2013

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document is part of a collection held at the Historical Papers Research Archive at The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.