Jean Krasno: First, President Gurirab, for background purposes could you please explain where you were born and educated and when you were first involved in the independence of Namibia?

Theo-Ben Gurirab: My biographical data is readily available and I’ll give you a folio on that, but I was born 23 January 1939, in a small railway town 142 kilometers east from Swakopmund, our coastal town. Actually, in my language the name of the place is generally known as Usacos. At the time of my growing up, it was the main railway conjunction in the whole of the country. As I was growing up, I felt that I was actually living in a paradise. Little did I know that I was living in the headquarters of racism. The communities were divided along racial lines not only between the whites and the blacks but also among the different black communities. But it was a fun place at that to have been growing up in. That is where I started my schooling. Unlike a much larger number of my siblings and cousins, I was one of the fortunate ones who did not go through the rigors of looking after cattle and doing household chores that they were required to do in
the village and many settlements in and around Usacos. I was fortunate in the sense that I had early education at a missionary school where I had my primary education.

I did my secondary education and teacher’s training at Okahandja which is about 75 kilometers northwest of Windhoek, the capital city, at a place called Agustinium. It’s a place that links in so many different ways the history of Namibia to the reformation led by Martin Luther in Germany many centuries earlier. The people who were associated with setting up that educational and training facility in Namibia were Lutherans to begin with and some money had been made available to those missionaries to set this school. Its importance for me, more than the connection with the church is that it was at that time the point of convergence of all the African students, those who were eligible or who had an opportunity one way or another to attend schooling and to have come together. It was not the intention of the colonial administration nor was it the intention of the school administration, for that matter; it was the economical situation. It was cheaper to bring all of us together at one place rather than to set up schools and training facilities in different parts of the country. What initially we did not realize ourselves was that by this arrangement, it was possible to bring together at one place the future leaders of Namibia from all parts of the country. It was there that most of us met. It became the hub of the political consciousness raising in the fullness of time. It was that school and the one next to it, not far from there, a catholic school at Dobra.

To come back to my early education, it was there that I did my secondary education and teacher’s training. I qualified as a teacher in 1960 but chose to go to Walvis Bay, our
harbor town, to work in fishing factories. They paid a little more than other job opportunities that were open for blacks. My intention was, while I qualified as a teacher, that I wanted to further my studies. I had not thought that it would have been possible for me to have gone abroad, but I had plans that if I had enough money saved that I would find a way to further my studies in South Africa. But politics came into being in the mid-50s as far as my own participation from 1957 onwards. Actually, the political consciousness raising started while I was at Agustinium between the years 1958 and 1960. The African political resistance movements were being formed, including SWAPO now the ruling party, as well as SWANU and others. From time to time, some of the initial leaders of that process, that movement, would come discretely at night from Windhoek to the school and provide political education classes and gatherings for us. But that is where it started.

African teachers were not allowed by law to participate as, if one is generous, as civil servants in any political activity. But pressure was mounting and we became responsive to the demand because we were the educated lot among the people and we should also take a lead in the political mobilization of the people, to talk to the people about the problems there were and what they could do to demonstrate and to protest and so on. That is how my political activities started. I had to be discrete; that was the requirement by law while I was a teacher. But I nevertheless got myself involved in political activities until 1962 when I decided to clandestinely leave the country and found my way newly self-governing Tanganyika which I reached in October 1962.
JK: When you talked about many of the leaders of Namibia started gathering at the secondary school where you were, did that include Sam Nujoma and Hage Geingob and some of these people?

TG: Not Sam Nujoma, but Hage Geingob and myself, Mdibo Amuteja (?). We came at different times. Hage Geingob and I came together. But there were others ahead of us. Not necessarily in the previous generation but I am talking about when the political activism started. There were people who were older than us but the same generation as we were. They were older than us significantly. They would be of Nujoma's age group. But he was a worker; he was not at that school. Our Deputy Prime Minister, Henrick Bredboy is older than us and was also a teacher there. He got his training there. Eventually, my generation of current Namibian leaders in the government and parliament, even in the private sector, come from Agustinium, the majority of them.

JK: So, then you left in 1962. Where did you go from there? You went to Tanganyika?

TG: Yes, but it was a long, long journey. I left the country under a false pretense. I cooked up a story, which succeeded and helped me to where I am today. The story being that I and my friend who left with me, Jan Bamba Weethap (?) who lives now in Sweden and shuttles between Sweden and Namibia, was that we were actually natives, native meaning nationals – our countries were not independent and we were not citizens – from now Malawi, then Yasaland. The story was that we had been in South West Africa
(Namibia) under contract, working in the local factories in Walvis Bay and that we had overstayed the terms of our contract. We were good people; we did not violate any laws but we were advised that we should leave the country. We had a friend in the magistrate’s office who was very skillful and helpful, indeed, who issued us with two sets of documents to that effect. One was a voluntary deportation order with all the appropriate quotations on it and one a traveling pass which blacks were required to be in possession of. So, on that basis, we left Walvis Bay by train and traveled through the rest of the country, through South Africa, through Botswanaland – Botswana was not independent then – through Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, through Northern Rhodesia which is now Zambia, up to Tanganyika which is now Tanzania.

JK: When did you become a member of SWAPO?

TG: SWAPO was formed in 1960 and I officially became a member in 1961.

JK: When did you first become involved in the United Nations?

TG: In 1963, while I was in Tanganyika. I won a UN fellowship. It was a UN fellowship that brought me to the United States in June 1963 as a student at Temple University in Philadelphia. English was not our official language nor was it spoken widely in Namibia at that time. We were required, therefore, initially to do some brushing up of the language and science and math courses. Then I eventually became a student at Temple University where I did my undergraduate studies in political science.
and graduate studies in international relations. My personal association with the country started in 1963 and continues, I should think.

JK: SWAPO achieved a very unusual status at the UN. It became an official observer of the UN. How was that established and what were the forces that came together to actually establish that status for SWAPO?

TG: Yes, there were a number of forces. First was that when the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was founded on the 25th of May 1963, just shortly before I left Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Perhaps within a year of its founding, one of the committees set up by the Organization of African Unity was called the Liberation Committee. The full title is The Coordinating Committee for the Liberation of Africa, but it is briefly called the Liberation Committee, which was headquartered in Dar es Salaam. It called together the leaders and representatives of all the existing national liberation movements of Africa, of Mozambique, Angola, of Rhodesia, even Kenya and Uganda, that were not independent, Guinea Bissau, all the countries that were not independent. They were mostly from eastern, central, and southern Africa. The question was for these leaders to indicate to the Liberation Committee the ways and means by which they as the people from the countries consent, propose to proceed to find freedom, to achieve freedom and independence for their countries and their people. They were, therefore, asked after that initial meeting to go back and prepare so-called programs of action, setting out their objectives and goals. This was done in order for the Liberation Committee to not only recognize those movements that in their judgment deserved to be recognized and supported, but secondly,
and more importantly, to go out throughout the world, the independent African countries, and other countries of the third world to mobilize support for those movements. We did so. SWANU, the party of our compatriot that you mentioned, Moses Katjiuongua, who was one of the prominent members, were the two movements. Both of us presented our programs of action. In our case, SWAPO, we said in addition to the United Nations mobilizing the international community for supportive assistance, we would also organize a military resistance body. We specifically asked the Liberation Committee and the OAU member states to assist us to train our combatants to launch the armed struggle. SWANU felt that the objective conditions in Namibia and the practicalities of how to get from whatever to Namibia was such that they did not think the time was right for launching the armed struggle. Others like Guinea Bissau opted for armed struggle in addition to political campaigns and diplomatic activities. But the long and the short of it is that both SWAPO and SWANU were recognized as befitting support and were supported until finally, the OAU decided that it was SWAPO that was doing most of the campaigning and had gained recognition and support beyond the OAU member states internationally, including by the UN. So, that was how the UN and the OAU worked together. So, that was one thing.

Secondly, on that basis, in 1972, at a summit held in Rabat, Morocco, the OAU decided to actually recognize those liberation movements that in their judgment (of the OAU member states) and as recommended by the Liberation Committee, should be supported. Resources were scarce and therefore, it didn’t want to waste money on organizations that did not have a chance to make a difference. In the case of Namibia, SWANU was not de-
recognized, per se, but they somehow were not present and did not do what was expected of them. After that exercise, the OAU, in 1972, recognized liberation movements as the sole and authentic representatives of their people. They campaigned for recognition and support and assistance in the international community. The OAU member states, therefore, when they came to the UN, in the resolutions in the General Assembly, inserted the action taken by the OAU and initiated a similar action here within the UN and gained support. So, it was on the basis that in 1972, SWAPO was recognized as the sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people. And step-by-step I was directly involved from that point onwards.

We reached a point where in the late 70s; SWAPO was recognized as the Permanent Observer, as opposed to an observer in 1972, a Permanent Observer. There is a difference in quality between the two. I was eventually provided with a seat in the General Assembly.

JK: So, you became the representative.

TG: I became the representative here.

JK: About what year was that?

TG: The initial recognition came in 1972, but this recognition that elevated SWAPO at the level similar to countries like Switzerland, the Holy See that represents the Vatican,
intergovernmental organizations like the Organization of American States [OAS], the Organization of African Unity [OAU], and so on. It was only SWAPO and the PLO, for Palestine, of the liberation movements who enjoyed that status.

JK: That's right; it was very unusual.

TG: Only the two of us. That was in 1978.

JK: That then coincides with the Resolution 435, so what is the connection because it is the same year?

TG: Not necessarily, there is no direct connection, a heavy coincidence, the two things. Because the adoption of Resolution 435 started following the election of President Carter in 1977, not so much the election, per se, but as a consequence of the election of President Carter, Ambassador Andrew Young became the U.S. ambassador to the UN. Cyrus Vance became the Secretary of State. Richard Mute (?) became Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. These people had a different approach to African issues than their predecessors. It was they who initiated consultations among the members of the Security Council, initially the Western members of the Security Council. You have the Western Permanent Members the U.S., Britain, and France, but at that time between 1977 and 1978, you also had Germany and Canada as Non-Permanent members on the Security Council. The five of them together started what is now known as the
Western Contact Group on Namibia. They started a long, drawn out negotiating process, which eventually culminated in the adoption of Resolution 435.

JK: Were you, as a representative of SWAPO, involved in the discussions that eventually formulated the language that went into the resolution?

TG: Yes, I was the principal contact person and spokesman for SWAPO. The groundbreaking resolution, the mother of resolution 435, was adopted in January 1975. It was in that resolution for the first time that the United Nations specifically called for the holding of free and fair elections in Namibia under the supervision and control of the United Nations to give the Namibian people an opportunity to exercise their right to self-determination and freedom and independence. But there was opposition to it until the election of President Carter’s Administration and the process that I have explained. But I was also involved in Security Council Resolution 385 of 1976, which was initiated by then the UN Commissioner for Namibia, Mr. Sean MacBride, a former Irish foreign minister who was at that time in 1975-76, the UN Commissioner for Namibia.

JK: About that same time, the Council for Namibia was established. What was the purpose of establishing the Council for Namibia and what did it actually do? What were its functions?

TG: The Council was established earlier in 1967. In 1966, the UN General Assembly after the World Court had failed to give a clear ruling on the basis of which the UN would
have done something to force South Africa out of Namibia, out of frustration, the General Assembly said, “Enough is enough.” By an historic resolution, a very far-reaching resolution 2248 of the General Assembly of 1966 terminated South Africa’s mandate over Namibia. Following that, it set up the United Nations Council for Namibia in 1967 and giving it a wide-ranging mandate. It gave it the responsibility to proceed forthwith to Namibia to establish itself inside the country and to organize the people and to assist them and organize elections and declare independence, and come back. That didn’t happen. South Africa said, “Ha ha ha.” Smart people that they were, they didn’t challenge South Africa. That situation existed until 1970. The mandate had been terminated; there was no way to kick South Africa out of the UN; and in the meantime, South Africa was still in Namibia. The Security Council was as a body skeptical about the action taken by the General Assembly. Some members felt that the General Assembly had gone beyond its mandate in having taken such a far-reaching action. Some people were more legally oriented.

On the basis of that, in 1970, the Security Council collectively asked the Court. The situation had gone from bad to worse since 1966. South Africa had its own reaction and had stepped up repression and imposed bogus homeland policies similar to what you had in South Africa, in Namibia. Angered by that, the Security Council decided to seek an advisory opinion from the World Court, something to the effect that, “given the fact that the General Assembly had terminated South Africa’s presence in Namibia and given the fact that South Africa, in spite of that decision, refused to comply, what can we do?” The
Court said that what the General Assembly did was legal and “whatever you can do within the competence of the UN Charter, you are free to do.”

JK: Had there been changes in the Court that made this reversal in approach to the situation?

TG: The International Court: we elected new members to today, this morning, in fact, five additional members, some renewals of mandates and others as new members. There are 15 members of the Court. The Court is supposed to be apolitical, but we know as a practical matter that the Court has very often been influenced by those who wield power. Certainly the ruling in 1966 surprised lawyers, frustrated the United Nations, and utterly disappointed us, who had hoped that given the fact that our case was so just that the Court would rule in our favor. We were happy that in 1971, the American president of the Court, not that he decided, provided leadership. The current president is also American, no connection between the two things. But, whatever, had been done in the Court, the outcome was far reaching. The judgment was given in June 1971. It was an advisory opinion, which has really gone much farther than what the Court used to do, not only on the Namibian question but generally. So, responsibility was given to the Council for Namibia. It was a council of member states assisted by a Commission appointed by the General Assembly at the level of Assistant Secretary-General. When the Council could not proceed to Namibia, the Council started setting up machinery here at the UN and in the neighboring countries, Zambia particularly, in Africa, to begin to implement those things they could implement without being inside the country. Among the things that the
Council did was to provide the Namibians with travel and identity documents, issued by the Council and recognized by the member states. So, I was traveling all over the world with the Council for Namibia document. The Council also set up so many different kinds of scholarship and training programs for Namibians outside. The Council also through the Office of the Commissioner for Namibia started doing research into different aspects of Namibia’s economy and the illegal activities of South Africa. After the advisory opinion of the Court, South Africa’s presence in Namibia was declared illegal. So any action taken in Namibia by South Africa, any bad action -- and all of them were bad -- were deemed illegal. The Council was also researching into what specific things South Africa was doing following the ruling of the Court, while submitting annual reports to the General Assembly for consideration and action by member states.

The Council, in 1975, set up the United Nations Institute for Namibia in Lusaka, Zambia, of which our now Prime Minister was the director. That institute adopted a more focused program of training in selecting young people that we were training as mid-level public administrators in different fields. It was a very successful program and a concrete example, more than anything else, of what the United Nations did to prepare the Namibian people for future responsibilities. I was a UN fellow. Some of us got UN fellowships and scholarships and obtained education in different countries all over the world. In terms of education and training and assistance to the United Nations Institute for Namibia and some other facilities we set up for education and health facilities in our camps, in Zambia and Angola, the United Nations provided not only the office of the Commissioner of Namibia and the UN Council for Namibia, but also the UN specialized
agencies, WHO, UNESCO, UNDP provided concrete material assistance to the Namibians under the care of SWAPO.

The resolution that set up the UN Council for Namibia among other things mandated the Council to proceed to Namibia. In the absence of that, the Council was supposed to have proceeded to Namibia and to carry out its mandate with the fullest possible, direct participation of the Namibian people themselves. Because they could not proceed to Namibia, instead of that and because SWAPO had been recognized by the UN, the Council consulted the Namibians, who were outside as refugees in the neighboring countries, the largest concentration having been in Zambia and in Angola, to consult them, to involve them. The Council also undertook some of the actions, which independent Namibia virtually inherited, stock, lock, and barrel. For example, SWAPO was recognized as the sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people as a Permanent Observer in the UN system, but there were some international conferences like the Law of the Sea, for example, where as a liberation movement we could not represent Namibia as a country. The Council was set up by the UN to do that. The Council was virtually the government of Namibia. We were freedom fighters to liberate the country. So, that enabled the Council for Namibia to sign certain treaties and conventions and protocols prior to Namibia’s independence, of course, after consultations with me and the other SWAPO leaders, on behalf of Namibia. When the Law of the Sea process started, for example, the Council for Namibia represented us and I was included in the delegation of the Council for Namibia. The Council signed a number of international agreements,
which at independence we inherited and accepted as valid international instruments that Namibia had entered into.

JK: That is very important history for the record because that is something I had not known.

TG: Exactly, and the Council also, as a part of its mandate, had power to legislate in the form of adopting decrees. And one of the most important decrees that the Council adopted, prepared by the Commissioner for Namibia in consultations with myself and the other SWAPO leaders, was decree “number one for the protection of the natural resources of Namibia.” It was passed and in the subsequent resolutions of the General Assembly and even of the Security Council later, it was illegal and member states were prohibited and advised not to engage in any legal relationships with South Africa which may lend legitimacy to an illegal, occupying regime in Namibia. So that helped us to get through the General Assembly additional resolutions under which UN member states were prevented from fishing illegally in Namibia’s waters. Because when the Law of the Sea Convention was passed, the Council for Namibia declared 200 miles exclusive economic zone for Namibia. When we went there, it was our first law in independent Namibia, to ratify what the Council had already done. The Council produced many, many documents that proved very helpful to us at independence.

JK: This is a sort complex and analytical question. You were able to achieve a great deal within the UN, a very unusual accomplishment because there were other turmoils
and other liberation movements in other parts of the world that never achieved what you were able to do. What kind of leverage did you bring to bear to achieve this? In other words, how did you understand how the power structures worked and how did you bring that together to make this happen?

TG: That question really deals with me and if I answer it, I would really be talking about myself. Because I was right in the center and I don’t necessarily want to do that. But you touch on it. It is a question of understanding how the system operates. The United Nations operates not unlike the U.S. Congress through networking. The United Nations is structured around regional groups. There is an African Group; there is an Asian Group; there is a Latin American and Caribbean Group; there is the Western European and Others Group; and the Eastern European Group since the collapse of the socialist system in Eastern Europe. So, you get to know individuals. In order to network, you must know the key role players. In each social setting, there are leaders and there are followers. So, you get to know the key ambassadors. The chairmanships of the regional groups rotate on a monthly basis. You get to know individuals, not because they are chairpersons – there is more reason why you should know the chairpersons – but you get to know individuals and they get to know you. On that basis, you provide them with information and appeal to them; request them to assist the adoption of a particular resolution.

When I became the representative of SWAPO here, I wrote a letter to the Office of the Commissioner, the new one, not the one that was before, to ask for a ticket. Because the
UN had recognized SWAPO and I was the formal representative and I felt it was logical that they should pay for the ticket for me to fly to Lusaka where our headquarters was for consultations. And he wrote back politely and said that there was no provision in the program of work of the Council for Namibia approved last year by the General Assembly. In other words, “The request that you have made has financial implications that were not provided for.” I didn’t know what this man was talking about. So, I started asking people and they said that before money is spent, the General Assembly must specifically approve a budget for the Council in which there would be a budget line for travel. So, I asked, “How do you do that?” They said, “When we consider the next report of the Council submission to the General Assembly, we must find a language included that would provide for that.” That is how you get to understand the system operates. It has a lot to do with the person and how you are perceived. This is a very protocol conscious institution. The ambassadors are representatives of sovereign states. It was for an African liberation movement, or any liberation movement, a hostile environment.

[interruption]

The Western powers were seen as collaborators with Apartheid South Africa, with the illegal regime, because their corporations were in Namibia or in South Africa with extensions into Namibia. So, it was to us a question of how I managed it. I was not the first one; I succeeded Hage Geingob, who was the SWAPO representative here. Before him, there were others. But it was really during the years that I was here that we penetrated. The recognition came actually the year that I started and we continued to
strengthen not only SWAPO’s standing in the system, but we started getting the General Assembly to adopt specific resolutions as building blocks. Eventually, I was accepted as one of the key actors in the system. I think the achievements had basically to do with winning over the hearts and minds of the delegations.

JK: It is very interesting. I also wonder how the dynamics work. You personally pursued this and had a dedication to this. You learned how to get around the system and use the bureaucracy in different ways. But you also had to be persuasive. Part of leverage or part of power is whether you have benefits to offer or if you have some kind of coercion to threaten. But if you have neither of those things, what do you bring to bear? What I was wondering is, is there a kind of leveraging power in a kind of moral authority? In other words, did you appeal to people the moral issues of what was going on in Namibia? Was that part of your strategy?

TG: It was a combination. The moral case was compelling and the political decisions of the General Assembly, later political decisions through resolutions, declarations, statements of the presidents of the Security Council, and also particularly, the law behind the moral appeal carried a lot. That was one. Politically, it became clear with each passing year that the Namibians themselves were the leaders of their liberation cause. SWAPO had been accepted by the Namibian people and what SWAPO was saying and doing was assumed to enjoy the support of the Namibian people. That strengthened our political hand. But also, we later became a factor militarily on the ground. We could not match South Africa’s military might but as a guerrilla force, we asserted ourselves on the
ground in such a way that as Ambassador McHenry, my good friend who succeeded Ambassador Andrew Young as U.S. ambassador to the UN, put it, that, “Whether we like it or not,” referring to SWAPO, “those are the guys with the guns.” He was saying this in the light of attempts made by South Africa inside the country to find alternatives to SWAPO. People were being depicted as democrats; people were being depicted as being non-violent, people who had rejected the military option, people who were willing to carry on a dialogue, and people who were ready for an internal settlement, a bogus independence. We could spoil anything on the ground if it excluded us.

So, we had moral force behind us; we had political solidarity both on the part of the Namibian people, the OAU, the Non-aligned movement, and the “peace-loving and progressive forces” as we called them of the whole third world, including also among the peace-loving forces individual senators and individual congressmen. Later, the Black Caucus came into being. We had progressive members of parliament in the United Kingdom, all Labor Party members. And particularly, in Europe beyond the United Kingdom, the Nordic countries, the Scandinavian countries emerged as European countries that saw the legitimacy of the struggle of the Namibian people led by SWAPO, recognized SWAPO, allowed us to open offices in key European countries, with offices in London, in Germany, in Paris, in Stockholm, Sweden, Moscow. All those things helped. What was the lone voice of the Namibian people became the voice of everybody.
JK: Fantastic, that is a beautiful pulling together of all of those forces. And what is fantastic is that you understood all of that and you orchestrated that here, a very important factor, very important.

TG: Because this is where we coordinated all that and I was at the center of it all.

JK: During 1988, there was a lot of negotiation going on outside of Namibia to try to bring about the agreement on the removal of the Cuban troops which had been linked to the whole process under the Reagan Administration. While that was proceeding and proceeding in a very positive way, inside Namibia it seemed to be quite different. There was a tremendous amount of turmoil. The students had boycotted, starting in the north and that had spread throughout the country, and not only students, but workers, and everybody. What was the connection or disconnection between what was going on on the outside and what was going on on the inside?

TG: There was always a connection between what was going on on the outside. Freedom is one. The people had clearly come out not only as self-liberators by doing some of the things that you were saying in spite of the repression and militarization of the country by the Apartheid forces. In spite of all the attempts made by the Apartheid regime and its apologists abroad to say that Moscow controls SWAPO and Sam Nujoma is outside. They are the bad guys. There are other SWAPO people inside the country and they are the good guys. In spite of that, SWAPO was one. The Namibian people on each occasion where public attempts were being made to drive a wedge between those of us
outside and those inside, demonstrated that we were one people. Attempts included the installation of bogus internal governments. The last one was installed in 1985 during the period that you are talking about, from 1985 until 1989 when we started going back. That was the government in Namibia ostensibly run by blacks, by Namibians, some of them who were former freedom fighters like the friend you mentioned and others who had become part of that government. It was a way to confront the international community and the UN with a *fait a complit*, i.e., the Namibian people internally have decided to opt for this. If SWAPO and those who were outside wanted to come and join this thing that is accepted by the Namibian people, they are welcome to do so, but the days of armed struggle, a military solution, are over.

In a way, to lend some legitimacy to that bogus effort by South Africa, the Reagan Administration in the 1980s through Chester Crocker tried to link Namibia’s independence with the presence of Cubans in Angola, a dual policy of so-called constructive engagement. “You don’t have to hit the South Africans over the head, you should talk to them,” not a stick, but only a carrot, and a bigger carrot at that. In the meantime, to get the Cubans out, there would be a dialogue with South Africa, constructive engagement with South Africa. If the Cubans leave, it would expose the weakness of the Angolan government which is supporting SWAPO. It would also expose and weaken SWAPO. That was the strategy but it did not work.

There was never a division on the question of freedom, self-determination, and independence between the Namibians at home and the Namibians in exile.
JK: OK, let me see if I can understand this correctly. There needed to be shown that inside Namibia there was solidarity with SWAPO and no matter what negotiations were going on on the outside. Because while they were going on, it was not absolutely clear how they would get resolved. So, was there coordination by the SWAPO leadership to maintain this pressure inside Namibia?

TG: Yes, but actually, it was not only the SWAPO leaders. The resistance at home, which we used to call the first front, the natural resistance of the Namibian people, we linked that with the German occupation earlier. This was actually church leaders who had publicly taken a stance against South Africa’s illegal occupation and condemned the Western countries for aiding and abetting South Africa or turning their backs on us. It involved youth and students who were boycotting schools and others were confronting the army and the police. It included women, women’s organizations. We had different ways in which women inside the country would assist. We had a SWAPO women’s council outside. Those had leaders inside. When they were victimizing these people, we had ways in which we were sending in money for them. Particularly the church leaders had opportunities to come outside to attend church meetings that were held in the United States, Geneva, and elsewhere. And so we used to arrange to meet them.

JK: The Shejavalis.
TG: Before him also, Shejavali was one of them. Dumeni was another. There was the Bishop, the old man who resembled in a curious way Dr. Martin Luther King’s father.

JK: Was he the Bishop before Dumeni?

TG: Yes, Bishop Auala. His students used to come out and we would meet them, Reverend Kamieta, who is now our Deputy Speaker. So these people were able to come out. Occasionally, a student came out. There were various ways in which we were able to communicate. We also we had our friends from outside in Europe and the U.S., Canada, people who were not necessarily visible as leaders of liberation support groups, the anti-Apartheid movement and so forth, people who were behind us. They would go in as academics, say all the right things to reporters that the regime would want them to say. They were able to go and stay two or three weeks, go around and play ball with the army and the police and bring out information and we would in turn send in information. There are so many examples that I could site of people that we used that way.

JK: The boycotts in 1988, if I am correct, started spontaneously with the rape of a young girl in a school.

TG: Yes, but actually, it was something that had been going on since the 1970s, a whole generation of people. The first mass student uprising started in 1974-75, with the collapse of the fascist regime in Portugal and the independence of Angola. That started a large wave; thousands of young people had gone out of the country, but that tradition had
remained. The more the country was being militarized, the more the students were refusing. Because schools were taken over across the country; also in the north they were taken over by the army. It was the soldiers who became teachers and were teaching the children armed with AK-47s and other machine guns wearing uniforms, military fatigues. They were teaching the children and the students refused. Some were killed. It was not spontaneous in the sense that it just happened. These were manifestations of political education and campaign that had been going on since the formation of SWAPO. It was spontaneous in the sense that students expressed their opposition to the South African presence across the country.

JK: Did the students understand the negotiations that were going on outside?

TG: Very clearly, very clearly.

JK: They knew that what they were doing put additional pressure to the outside negotiations.

TG: They understood that we defined the struggle on three fronts. We called the first front political resistance or national resistance as the first front. That is the Namibian people themselves rejecting colonialism and Apartheid and demanding freedom and independence. We were a contingent of those people outside. Peoples’ resistance was the first front. The second front was the diplomatic front. The pursuit of the second front was making connections with the UN, with international organizations, sympathetic
parliamentarians, church leaders, liberation support groups. That is the second front altogether is by explaining the aspirations of our people to our friends -- the internationalist forces we called them -- that we were able to get assistance, including weapons. With that we launched the third front, that is the armed struggle. The focus was always the people. However many were outside, we were a small fraction of those inside. The real resistance was inside the country.

JK: Do you have more time or do you have an appointment now?

TG: I have two more appointments if you have time to wait.

JK: I could wait. So, we will just interrupt for a while and begin again.

[interruption]

JK: Now we are going to pick up where we left off. There are three more areas that I wanted to talk to you about. I will name the three now so that we can kind of think about them. I would like your interpretation of what happened on April first in the north. I'd also like to talk to you about security issues during 1989 within Namibia in general. And the other part that I would like to talk to you about is that many people say that once UNTAG was established in Namibia, it was basically a piece of cake. Independence was going to happen and it wasn’t a difficult operation. I just wanted to get your
interpretation of that, whether that is really a fair assessment. Let’s start with your point of view on April first; what happened on April first?

TG: A combination of things, everybody is in one way or another responsible for the tragedy of April first. First, all throughout the 435 negotiations which preceded the adoption of 435, but we call them 435 negotiations, there was this one issue that was controversial and could not be resolved and really touched the very core of the conflict between the two to the conflict and the two parties that signed the cease-fire agreement at the end, namely South Africa and SWAPO. The issue is confinement of forces. The language is “confinement of forces to base.” South Africa maintained that the SWAPO terrorists do not have military bases inside the country. They were doing that deliberately. That is what that really meant. “They do not have military bases and you people should not say to the negotiators, the Western Five, the Front-Line States and so on, you should not try to accord SWAPO an advantage to erect military bases inside the country which they do not have presently. They come into Namibia and carry out terrorist activities and they run back. They are not really present here.” OK, that was their contention. Therefore, South Africa was opposed to SWAPO being given military bases inside the country. That was South Africa’s contention.

We were saying, “We are a guerrilla army. We are not a conventional army. We do not operate out of structures. A guerrilla army operates in small units and we are everywhere in the country.” The South African government itself virtually on a weekly basis, through the signature of the Foreign Minister of South Africa, would write – and this is something
that is on the record; you can check as a part of this study – and complained about activities carried out by SWAPO inside the country, about incidents carried out inside the country. Therefore, South Africa knew our presence. Guerrilla armies do not operate from bases. It was therefore necessary for the United Nations, the Western Contact Group, and the Front-Line States to insure that those SWAPO military units that were inside the country, in their country, in Namibia, once the cease-fire is made, hopefully prior to the date of the announcement of the cease-fire, should be informed through channels that we knew to gather at two or three, depending on how many we had, locations and be confined to base. That argument had not been resolved.

Now 435 was adopted in 1978. It wasn’t implemented until 1989. So, during that intervening period so many things had changed. Actually, we had more people inside the country than we had in 1978. The Western countries felt, and wrongly so, that they had solved that problem. How? One was as part of the negotiations on linkage, the Angolans and the Cubans and South Africans agreed to sign a protocol, the Brazzaville Protocol, which was alter updated by the Geneva Protocol in August 1988, under which the Angolan government with the compliance of the Cubans and their friends the Soviets undertook to clear an area at the 16th parallel. South of that there would be no military activities of SWAPO. That having been done, the UN and the Western countries wrongly interpreted that situation to mean that Angolans and the Cubans and the Soviets would take care of SWAPO. They bought the South African argument that we were not inside the country. From time to time, we would go through there and carry out activities and come back.
JK: Were SWAPO representatives party to the agreement?

TG: No, we were not. I will come to that. We were not participating. We had rejected linkage and we were not participating. Even though we were hanging around to talk to our friends. It was part of a package and rising out of that was a specific aspect that related to Namibia. It was a larger package that led to an agreement on the fate of the Cubans and certain things the Angolans would do and South Africa would do, and so on. That issue had remained suspended. We had discussions with the Angolans and the Cubans asking, “What does this mean? You have signed this; you are a sovereign state, but what do you mean? And you are saying that we should withdraw our troops that are inside Namibia across this area which has now been accepted as a no-go area into Angola. That we cannot do. We have forces as you know inside, in the country. What do we do with them? We cannot walk through with those forces.” So, that thing remained unresolved. But once the agreement was signed by these countries, setting the date here for December 22nd in 1988, which unfortunately is linked with the tragic plane crash over Lockerbie, Scotland. The UN Commissioner for Namibia, a Swedish fellow, Karl Bant (?) was also on that plane. He was on his way over here to attend that meeting. Somehow, mysteriously, the South African foreign minister, defense minister, and delegation coming for that meeting who were supposed to be on that plane changed their plane. It is a mystery why they changed it.
Anyway, there was a euphoria, a big ceremony, here just next door [to the president of the GA’s office] in the ECOSOC chamber. The agreement was signed and that fixed the date of the first of April as the “D” day for the commencement of the implementation. In that excitement UN people started sending in their officials and we signed the cease-fire. We had our troops inside in the country. It was the fault of the United Nations and those who were advising them that they should have made sure that either SWAPO and South Africa had reached an agreement and had assumed the responsibility that they were not going to violate the terms of the cease-fire or whether they were going to work out something that even if SWAPO forces were not given a place where they could go. They didn’t have to call them bases, we were saying. In Zimbabwe they were called assembly points.

Someplace where we could call our fellows who were armed people. You don’t want to have that situation when you are going to have elections. We simply said that you should provide us with a place where we are going to instruct our fellows to gather without the fear of being attacked by the South Africans. That had not been done. So, when people assumed the problem had been solved, it was not solved.

We also stand to be blamed because we did not do enough, SWAPO that is, in informing not only the people inside the country – there were a lot of people inside the country and they knew how to take care of themselves as they had been doing over the years – but those who were in the southern part of Angola, who had retreated because of combat who were on their way; the message did not reach them properly. Some of them ended up, unfortunately, in that tragedy. So, everyone has a responsibility. Nothing happened that you could say it was this party or the other. Unfortunately, when the event took place, the
Prime Minister of Great Britain, Margaret Thatcher, was in Zimbabwe. She went over to Namibia. I think it was arranged that the South African foreign minister came up to Windhoek and the two of them met with the now President of Finland, President Ahtisaari, who in a way, some people felt, panicked because the mission was going to collapse. He asked for advice, or authorization, whether he could ask the South Africans, because the UN didn’t have troops then there, to take care of the situation. The Security Council said yes. The South Africans said, “Halaluya,” and unleashed their armory. That is the tragedy of April first.

JK: I understand that Marrack Goulding had had a meeting with Sam Nujoma about a couple of weeks before April first in which they had had a discussion on this issue. Marrack Goulding had explained to Sam Nujoma the interpretation that the UN had of the agreement that assembly areas were not going to be set up inside Namibia.

TG: Yes, that’s true. I know that Goulding is a wonderful professional. But that issue was never resolved. It was never resolved. There is not a UN person that can look you in the face and say that that issue had been resolved. It was never resolved. It was simply left suspended. The commitment that we had made which I had neglected to mention is that after these countries had signed the agreement at Brazzaville, and the Geneva Protocol, the Angolan government asked SWAPO, in the light of that agreement or protocol, that we would accept that protocol and would therefore not undertake new initiatives across that area that was announced, as I said, the no-go area. To that extent, we had accepted the Brazzaville-Geneva Protocol. It is a revisionist explanation.
myself had a discussion with the first Commander Prem Chand in the delegates lounge a couple of days before he left. And I raised that issue, and that the issue remained unresolved. “How are you going to do it? You are going now to Namibia; you are going to start setting up your mission. That issue remains unresolved. How are you going to do it?” He said, “Well, I was not here when negotiations were taking place. I was told that the issue was resolved.” I said, “I am telling you that it has not been resolved.”

I think that the UN people misled themselves that the indirect negotiations on linkage and our acceptance of the Brazzaville Protocol had somehow resolved that issue. But as far as the negotiations that I was involved with, that issue had never been resolved.

JK: That is an important point to clear up, a very important point. When did you arrive in Namibia?


JK: In June 1989, how did you find the security situation there? Was there violence? Were there threats against you or your SWAPO members?

TG: We are talking about it now nearly ten years after and what I didn’t know then, I know now. It is almost, one can say, a miracle that some of us came out alive. During the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission trials, so much information had come in of what was in store for SWAPO, anything from shooting down the plane in
which we arrived to some of us who were on the list to be killed, including those who
were killed, not only Anton Lubowski but others, as well. How dirty trick operators were
aiding and abetting not only financially but also in helping them with their election
campaigns, providing them with weapons. The amount of money that was spent, the
South Africans were forced later to admit that they had spent $100 million, and we think
that that is a ridiculous figure, on one of the internal parties to defeat SWAPO. One of
the things that I noticed in the disinformation campaign style through the media that was
controlled by the enemy, was very sleek, certainly not Namibian. Sleek ways in which
there was an extensive use of dirty tricks and disinformation campaign against SWAPO
and individual leaders.

Regarding security, the policing of the transition and the South African security presence,
it was gradual withdrawal. The remaining bulk of South African troops and paramilitary
forces were withdrawn while we were there, physically. To that extent, we were
vulnerable. We are prominent people, so the fact that we were not attacked did not mean
that SWAPO members were not attacked, those who were not known. So, the security
situation was very tense. South Africa had trained killer units. We called them Koevoet.
The south had 20,000 strong South West African Territory Force, an indigenous army
that was created, not the South African Defense Force. It was an indigenous army that
was trained as a countervailing force against the SWAPO army. The security situation
was very tense. UN had something to do with mitigating it, but I think it was the large
contingents of international observers and just people of all kinds who saturated the
country that for fear that maybe they were being watched, they didn’t do what they
intended to do. A lot came out in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Lastly, about UNTAG presence, if I had said what I said about the second point, security issues, then UNTAG presence could not have been a piece of cake. UNTAG succeeded in Namibia, and this is a very important point for me to stress, because the Namibian people were ready to cooperate with UNTAG. What were its weaknesses? UNTAG, we saw was there to achieve freedom and the independence we had fought for and the UN has been a friend. Not perhaps the individual officers, we did not know them; they were faceless people. There were their thousands, but the United Nations blue flag and the blue helmets to assist the Namibian people, not SWAPO, per se, to achieve freedom and independence. The UN succeeded because the Namibian people cooperated with UNTAG and made its task possible. The political parties cooperated. We signed the Code of Conduct and pledged to abide by it and by and large observed the terms of the Code of Conduct. We insured SWAPO that our guerrillas who were now in civilian clothes with their weapons tucked away elsewhere, didn’t make use of them. We were having regular meetings with the UN people, with representatives of the Western countries, to ensure that there was no violence against the United Nations people. But the bottom line is where the UN is failing, or was not as successful as in Namibia, was because the people were divided. This is the case in Cambodia and in Angola, also, or in Bosnia. The forces were not united in support of the UN. We welcomed the United Nations and gave them support. We made it possible for the United Nations to have scored a great victory.
JK: There were some groups within Namibia that did not necessarily support independence or if they did support independence, for example the DTA, supported it but they wanted it under their terms. It seems as though while everybody says they wanted independence for Namibia, it is an over simplification.

TG: I am talking about the majority of the Namibian people. The DTA does not, as a political party, quite qualify in that context as the Namibia people. They are still suffering from that stigma. At the time that we came, they were defending the old order. They were the right hand of the South African regime. They were the leaders, some of them, of the Koevoet and the South West African Territory Force that I am talking about. We are talking about a political party which was created by South Africa, which was funded by South Africa, and which was serving South Africa. They were opposed to independence. I don’t necessarily count them among the Namibians that I am talking about. There were those who were my schoolmates at the Agustinium. Some of them studied here. They left and went home and were recruited and they survived as politicians before 1989 because they were protected by South Africa. These people were despised by their families. They did not see their families. These are people who were provided with houses and places to stay under the protection by the South African army and police and the security units. In terms of freedom, self-determination, and the independence of Namibia, did not count among the Namibians I am talking about. I am talking about the large number of patriots who wanted freedom and independence who had been part of the long and bitter struggle led by SWAPO.
JK: That is a good explanation. It is just that sometimes people who don’t understand what was going on inside Namibia simply say that everybody wanted independence for Namibia, therefore, it was an easy job for UNTAG while they were there. But if really interview people and talk to people who were there in UNTAG on a daily basis, they really had to work hard to keep DTA and other elements, and Koevoet, under control, so that they didn’t disrupt the process. There were many crises through that period in which if the UN, the Special Representative and the Deputy Special Representative, the CivPol and others had not worked on a constant basis, the process could have deteriorated.

TG: Let’s just back track a little bit. The original resolution that I had talked about in January 1975, which for the first time with a program called for free and fair elections under UN supervision and control, that idea was weakened later under 435 negotiations. Initially, the UN had the idea of only sending monitors, only monitors. This is on record, on paper. The fact that we had that military force in Namibia was solely because of SWAPO. We insisted. We knew the regime that we were fighting against. It was a fascist, military regime that is killing and destroying property and we, therefore, wanted an effective UN military presence with battalions. But also, we wanted the Special Representative of the United Nations which had assumed direct legal responsibility over Namibia to be the boss and to have veto power. We could not prevent the South African representative from forming a team with the UN Special Representative, but we wanted the Special Representative to have the overall authority as a UN territory.
JK: Well, we have run out of time, so I want to thank you so much.

TG: My pleasure.