Yale-UN Oral History Project

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James S. Sutterlin, Interviewer
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James Sutterlin: Fred, first of all I want to thank you very much for giving your time and attention to this oral history project at Yale dealing with the United Nations and as you know we are including Namibia as one of the subjects that we are covering and you were there. So, I would like to talk to you this evening about your experiences there and about your perceptions of the Namibia transition. I would like to begin by asking how did you get there. In other words, what was your position before you went to Namibia in the United Nations and how were you chosen?

Fred Eckhard: I was a junior member of the spokesman's office for the Secretary-General in New York and I believe that the spokesman thought I'd be better off in the field. He recommended me for the job as an assistant to the spokesman who had already been designated by Mr. Ahtisaari going back ten years. Ahtisaari was extremely loyal to the people who worked for him and he tried to bring back as many of the people from 1978 as he could. In the case of the spokesman, this was a Tunisian [Anwar Cherif] who I believe at the time was an information center director in Tunis. We still hadn't learned the lesson at that time that you need a spokesman in place with the advance team. And already the force commander, who was in place and troops were arriving, was besieged by press. And he was screaming to New York, "Send me an information person!" Meanwhile the Tunisian was stuck in North Africa with a house to get rid of and a family

to move to New York before he went off to Namibia and they needed someone else. So, the spokesman recommended that I be sent. So, that is how it happened.

JS: When did you get there? I don't mean the exact date, but the critical date was April 1st. That is the day when the peace plan was supposed to go into effect.

FE: My recollection is that I arrived the first week of March, and so we were reporting primarily on logistics at that time. The chief of staff of Mr. Ahtisaari, Cedric Thornberry, had a keen interest in press relations. And when he arrived shortly before the first of April, he took over on the political side. So, for three weeks or so I just held the fort and reported primarily on logistics and arrivals of troops.

JS: Reporting to whom?

FE: There was quite a gathering of press there. Certainly, Namibia itself had quite a developed press corps. The South Africans had keen interest. I seem to recall that there may have been some Portuguese press there as well. So, the press were descending on Namibia. It was a new story for those regional media.

JS: I want to move ahead for a moment a little bit out of order because you mentioned Cedric Thornberry. From the various people that I talked to in the field, he was one of the people at headquarters whose name was relatively well known. His name was also well

known in New York, as you know, not always favorably. What was his position exactly and how did he figure into headquarters' staff?

FE: Again, he was one of those with a long standing relationship with Mr. Ahtisaari, going back to the days when Mr. Ahtisaari had been Finnish ambassador, I believe, in Lusaka, Zambia with responsibility for Namibia, as well. Cedric Thornberry was something like an Amnesty International lawyer, taking the side of Namibian politicians and political activists against the South African legal system. Cedric had gotten into some difficulty in the peacekeeping department in the UN and there were people who thought that his ouster from the UN was the last he would be seen there. But it was Martti Ahtisaari who in a sense resurrected him and brought him back, as I would describe it, chief of staff. I think it was his finest hour because first of all he was very close to Martti and that's important to have a headquarters unit at the top that is coherent. Second, as chief of staff he could speak therefore with Martti's authority. And third, he organized the mission, as least from my point of view, as far as a gatherer of information, in an interesting way. He had three tiers or three separate reporting chains. He had the political officers in the field who reported daily. He had the police which were his special responsibility. As I recall, Martti asked him to keep an eye on the civilian police, which were a very important component of this mission and more or less established the importance of civilian police to peacekeeping, generally. And then the military, for which he didn't have a lot of respect.

But he then had a staff at headquarters that was assigned first to the military. He had a military liaison person. The military were across town at a different base. So, he

had one person who went to that base and sat in on the force commander's morning meeting. He had a second person who did the same thing for the police commissioner's morning meeting. And then he had a cluster of others who divided the country by regions and who first received an overnight cable from the political officers in the field and then the next morning, as they read the cables of what happened the day before, they phoned these field offices to ask follow-up questions to what was in the cables and to get late breaking developments. All of that was before a morning meeting of all these people that he held at maybe at 10:00 or 11:00. It was interesting if something slipped by the military and the police, then the civilian picked it up. Rarely did anything important slip between all three nets. Then he was quite a terrorist because if the police failed to report something important that had come in on the civilian net, he would tell his officer who was dealing with the police commissioner, "You go down there and you chew him out and you tell him his people missed something important and next time, they better get it right."

He liked putting the fear of God into people, but I must say I sat in that morning meeting and I had a good sense of what was going on in the country. I then gave a press briefing at noon. The journalists, of course, are always the first to know anything and if I could just hold my own when they said, "Well, we understand that a man was killed in Rundu last night," I could say, "Yes, we had a report on that and the police are investigating it." It was very helpful to me. So, I ran a reasonably well informed press briefing each day and it was thanks to this system that Cedric devised and I think worked beautifully.

JS: At the next level up, that is at the top level, there was a kind of a three-headed team in the Special Representative, his deputy, and the military field commander. How did that work? How did they function?

FE: Of course, we are going back to this 1978 team. So, after ten years, both the police commissioner and the force commander were feeling a bit tired. They were not particularly energetic. They had good staff. That is not to say that they were not good leaders, but they weren't forceful which again left Cedric in an unchallenged number two position until Legwaila was brought in as the deputy. That was of interest to me politically. First of all, Ahtisaari felt very comfortable with Legwaila. And I don't know whether the Secretary-General made that appointment consciously. I assumed he did. Second, I believe Cedric had the office opposite Ahtisaari's which was a two office suite with a secretarial pool in the middle. And Cedric vacated that office and Legwaila walked into a newly furnished, freshly refurnished, executive office right across from Ahtisaari and was immediately brought into the top level of decision making. I never heard Joe Legwaila complain that he had not been fully consulted.

JS: So, it worked well.

FE: Yes. So, the three that ran the mission were Martti, Joe, and Cedric. The force commander and police commissioner had secondary roles, as far as I could tell.

JS: Although, I believe that General Prem Chand initially thought that he should be acting as deputy. Was that ever evident?

FE: No. The fact that he was off at a military base at the other end of town didn't give him a good, commanding position at headquarters. And second, he was a very refined gentleman and he never elbowed his way into anyone's office or inner circle where he wasn't wanted and third, as I mentioned, he was tired. I didn't sense he had a lot of fight in him.

JS: He actually sent in his resignation to the Secretary-General when the deputy was appointed.

FE: Oh really, I wasn't aware of that.

JS: I wanted to go now to the relationship with the South African representatives in Windhoek. How was this handled? Particularly Mr. Pienaar and his staff?

FE: I have less good recollections on that. I again seem to recall that Cedric took the lead on the relations with Pienaar and basically felt that they were a group that needed enlightenment, that you had to twist their arms in order to get them to do the minimum required under the plan. He seemed to find them difficult to work with. But my sense was that the South Africans had made a firm commitment to go through with the independence of Namibia as a dry run for what they were going to have to do at home.

And so, our leverage with Pienaar came from the South Africans who had a representative in Windhoek. Do you remember his name?

JS: No.

FE: I went out on a braai with him in the bush. I spent a drunken afternoon with him and his wife who was very pleasant. He was a very distinguished person who liked to drink on occasion but a very distinguished person. He was always helpful. It was a good cop - bad cop routine that they played. Pienaar seemed to be defending the interests of the conservative elements of Namibian society and the South African was prying things loose. I don't know whether they designed it that way or whether, in fact, that's how it was. But that is how it worked.

JS: Now, did these differences come out in your dealings with the press? In other words, did you have to go into the relationship with the South African representative, with the Administrator General, on such questions as the declaration on electoral procedures, the declaration on registration procedures where there were differences, as I understand it, between what his office wanted and what UNTAG wanted?

FE: The press was very well informed on all these matters. Of course, the local press, which included the South African press, tended to be better informed than I was. There were, under Namibian legislation, precise things that needed to be done to promulgate these laws and I seem to recall a lot of battles between Cedric on our side and Pienaar's

people on their side. We briefed daily, five days a week, so just about everything came before the press. It was a very free, western style press with little bit of, I want to say, naughtiness. Because they were playful at the same time, but their playfulness could be designed to embarrass me in a superficial way, a silly way, which had a political motivation underneath it to make UNTAG look silly. To give you an example, there was the SWAPO colored condom story where UNICEF was distributing condoms to the refugees. They were ordered from an American company in one of the southern states. They came in four different colors. And three of the colors were indeed SWAPO colors. They asked me this question; they produced these things as evidence at a press briefing and I turned red and dealt with it as best I could and then immediately got on the phone to try to find out who made these condoms. And I called the company in Alabama, or someplace, and I said, "Can you assure me that these particular colors were not ordered specifically and that they are your standard colors?" And they gave me the assurance but by that time the joke was over and I just looked silly. There was a fair amount of that. They were earthy; they were cunning, you know, in a political way and they probably got the better of me more than once.

JS: I judge that you are suggesting that there was a fairly sophisticated press corps there.

FE: Certainly, the police leaked to them photographs to them of murder victims, the kinds of things that police normally don't show to the press. Pienaar's office briefed them, gave them his side of the story, regularly. Of course, we were putting out our story

everyday, trying to return as many of the balls as we could. It was fun; it was lively. I thought we were grappling with the real issues. I was as sympathetic to the conservative press as I was to the liberals because I thought they were both grappling with the issues, in what was, in their way, an honest fashion.

JS: You say the conservative press, was the conservative press entirely white or was it mixed?

FE: There was the curious Turnhalle Alliance that had their newspaper or two or three. There were a lot of newspapers. That alliance was conservative, white with a conservative black as well as what were called Basters, or coloured, mixed race. So, it wasn't that easy to say it was black and white. As I recall, the Basters were spread out all over the place, but there was a concentration of them south of Windhoek just 30 miles or so. They were a very conservative lot. They trusted the whites more than they trusted SWAPO. It made the whole job of dealing with the press that much more interesting because it wasn't purely a black/white issue.

JS: Did you have to deal with the press in the initial period when SWAPO made the incursions into Namibia and UNTAG had to agree to the non-cantonment of the South African troops? Did you have to handle that?

FE: Well, I got my job as a result of that. The Tunisian guy [Anwar Charif] arranged to show up on Martti Ahtisaari's plane, curiously enough. There was an enormous

amount of work with the press for the day of Ahtisaari's arrival. So, I had done all of that. Of course, it was on the first day; it was April first that this crisis broke. And Martti sent Cedric up north to try to find out what was going on because, typical of the UN, at the beginning of the mission, we had only a handful of our staff in place. We had no communications equipment and if the South Africans said that SWAPO had crossed the border from Angola heavily armed, we had no independent way of verifying that. Cedric went north and the Tunisian suddenly had a huge press corps because now you had blood and guts. They were pouring out of Europe, coming down. There must have been fifty or sixty journalists hammering this poor Tunisian with tough questions whose answers were, "No comment," or "Read the documents." He didn't have the touch and so the journalists said to Cedric when he got back, "Fire your spokesman." They didn't fire him; he stayed on as director of information, but I was made the spokesman of the mission.

I myself went up to the border about the time the whole thing had settled down and we had agreed on a plan to repatriate any SWAPO that were still in the country but in hiding because they didn't trust the South African military. We agreed to set up border checkpoints where these people could turn themselves in, be disarmed, and be escorted back across the border to Angola. Every place we had a little tent. We had no flag poles, so we would attach the UN flag to the tallest tree nearest our tent. The South Africans moved in right next door and set up a military encampment that would have been the pride of any modern army, armored vehicles, jeeps, trucks, the whole business. Needless to say, very few SWAPO came to our little site with so many South Africans just next door.

There was a wounded SWAPO guy who came into our tent and the South Africans wanted to interview him. The military guy in charge was a British major and Cedric was also there with me, as I recall. And the South African said, "We want to interrogate the prisoner." The major said, "No way, he's our guy and you can't have access to him." So, the South Africans raised their automatic weapons and pointed at the major and he still said, "Over my dead body." They said, "We'll be back in one hour and if you don't turn him over, we're taking him." So, they left.

The major got on the horn to Windhoek. The British had Motorolas in their jeeps and they had a communications unit that could talk to those Motorolas. It was the only communications we had at the time. They called the British base which was four miles outside of Windhoek, saying, "Please get to the force commander or Ahtisaari and ask him what we should do." That jeep then called UNTAG headquarters; it was dinner hour. Both the force commander and the Special Representative were having dinner somewhere in Windhoek. The jeep went from restaurant to restaurant. There are only fifteen or twenty restaurants, but still there are enough that you couldn't get to all of them in an hour. So, Cedric took the decision and said to the major, "Tell him your force commander says to hold the line." So, the major went back out and these guys came up with their weapons again and he drew a line in the dirt and he said, "You cross that line and we'll shoot." And the South Africans backed off.

But, it is an illustration of how the lack of communications from the beginning of the mission, the lack of infrastructure, if you get any unusual challenge to the mission – we had the challenge on day one, April 1st – you're at a loss to deal with it competently.

JS: Eventually, you developed a good communication system, right?

FE: Yes, apparently we had satellite dishes placed on a ship to save the cost of air transport, so three or four months into the mission, suddenly all this good, sophisticated stuff showed up. Then by six months, we were state of the art. By that time, of course, all the hard work had been done.

JS: You mentioned the Tunisian became the director of information. When you did have communications, were all the programs developed in Windhoek that went out throughout the country?

FE: Well, the other thing about the information program was that Cedric insisted from the beginning that it was going to be essential to have a substantial information budget and this was a country that had a communications infrastructure. You had telephone lines that linked the whole country. You had television that reached areas around Windhoek, radio that reached everywhere. Cedric said, "We want TV programs; we want radio programs, and we want printed materials." But, of course, in a typically UN way, we had very few resources with which to do this. So, the radio programs were produced by a support staff, a single support staff woman, Lena Yacoumopoulou, who researched, wrote, and produced a five minute daily radio program that got aired in the early morning and then one or twice throughout the day. And she became the single best known person in UNTAG. Because people showering in the morning would have their radio on. And Lena had a rather deep, sexy voice. The men, in any case, used to fantasize about this

exotic foreign woman in their midst who was describing the work of UNTAG on a daily basis. That was the single most successful thing we did, I think, in the information area.

The television was a French woman [Isabelle Abric] who had been hired from the outside. I don't think she was a regular UN staff member. She hired a crew locally and she tried to do a program every couple of weeks or something, a fifteen-minute program, on a regular basis whatever it was. That got a certain amount of attention. Then we borrowed the art director from the information department in New York [Jan Arnesen] over their objections. We practically had to get Ahtisaari himself to commandeer her. And she went back and forth, but she would stay several weeks at a time. She went down into Katatura, the black township, got to know the artists and the cultural life there, found a particularly gifted Namibian artist and asked him--he did linocuts--to do linocuts of Namibian faces, of all different groups and make a vote poster. And that single poster is everyone's image of UNTAG. It was the best-known thing. But she also did brochures and when it came time, the idea of the "code of conduct" came out of the blue. Cedric and some others were talking and I don't know who takes credit for having thought of it, but they said, "We need to put that out." She designed it and then did it in languages and distributed it throughout the country.

We are talking about contributions by single individuals that suddenly were free just to get a job done and who did it well and then saw the positive results of it. That's one of the reasons why everyone who participated in the mission felt elated by the experience.

JS: And these were all produced on the ground not in New York and sent out?

FE: She [Jan Arnesen] shopped around. She found that getting certain parts of the job done in New York and then moving it somewhere else to be printed or if she could get it printed in South Africa cheaper than she could get it printed in Namibia, she did it that way. That was another thing that she did. She scouted around; she checked the cost of doing business in her area and she worked out the cheapest way to do it, which I think was a little different depending on the project.

JS: Speaking of New York, how did you perceive the relationship between UNTAG and New York and in particular, the so-called Namibia task force?

FE: This was my first mission, so I was particularly susceptible to what I'm told is universal, not just in the UN but in military, of governments around the world when you are on the ground, on the front-lines, you feel you have an intimate understanding of the situation and the people sending you orders from headquarters just don't understand what we're dealing with. "If you just stay off our backs and let us do the job, we'll get it done right." New York was facing a revolt by the African Group, as I understand. And, of course, the Secretary-General is responsible for maintaining relations with member states. We serve member states and he had a revolt on his hands and we, I don't think, gave that sufficient weight; at least at my level, we didn't. I was one of those who felt that if New York just would mind its own business...it was doing things for political reasons; we don't do things for political reasons. We have a mandate here to carry out. We are trying to carry it out in a business-like way. We only have one year to do it. We want to get it

done right and on time and if New York would just stop playing politics and let us do our work, everything would be fine. So that was my view of them.

JS: The New York attitude did, or course, reflect the influence of the so-called Front-line States and the Non-aligned Movement. I was wondering, did you have press representatives from the Front-line States and were they at all hostile, or more noticeably hostile, in their questioning than others?

FE: No, my sense was that those who reported regularly or even who came and stayed for a week or two quickly saw what we were doing and were sympathetic to it. I don't recall getting headquarters type questions. We all sensed that Mr. Ahtisaari's standing among Africans had plummeted as a result of his decision to let the South Africans out of base. The South Africans double-crossed him by behaving like brutes and rampaging through the north, killing everything in sight. They made the political cost to him of taking that decision as high as possible. Of course, among the South Africans, we talked about the gentleman from the foreign ministry, but there were the security services, the military. It wasn't clear that everyone in South Africa wanted to see this Namibia experiment succeed. One of our jobs was to phase out the South African military, contain them, and then have them pack up and go home. That was politically the most uncertain time for us because when the chief is wounded which was the case with Ahtisaari, we didn't know if we were going to pull out or not. We didn't know, after the events of the first of April, whether the mission would even be completed. It was a gradual, steady climbing out of that hole that we had been thrown into the first of April.

Getting Legwaila as the deputy, he turned out to be a good deputy. He and Ahtisaari got along and then he was gradually reaching out to these others. I will say that the Front-line States and the Non-aligned Movement all had offices or representatives in Windhoek. Those people were more sympathetic to us than their bosses out of Namibia. At the same time, they were critical of us and they had their instructions from headquarters. It was most gratifying to us at the end of the process when they came up to us and said, "Job well done," because they had been consistently critical of what we did. There were times when we really felt that they wanted to fire us all. I didn't sense it so much from the press.

JS: That's interesting. Now the political parties, particularly SWAPO, and Sam Nujoma himself, what was their relationship with UNTAG like? How was it carried out? Was it mostly in the field or did Ahtisaari meet with them on political questions?

FE: I don't think they trusted us because my impression, at least at the beginning, was that they felt that Namibia was theirs, and that the UN was there to turn over the country to them. And we felt that for our credibility, we needed to carry out the mandate in an impartial manner. We were dealing with the South Africans, I think, a lot more than we were dealing with SWAPO and SWAPO for us was just one other political party. My impression was, though, that SWAPO did not make any serious political mistakes and their organization was good. They had an uphill battle. Also, the South Africans had an idea of what percentage of the vote they were to get. There was a time when I wasn't sure that this election was entirely free and fair. It seemed to me like people were trying to

reach a certain outcome, a victory by SWAPO but not an overwhelming victory. And, of course, that is how it ended up. Once they won the election, they too turned to us with a lot of gratitude. But before then, there were times when they suspected we were colluding with the South Africans.

As I say, our relations were primarily with Pienaar and his people, the South Africans backing up those people, and the Contact Group. Ahtisaari was always pushing buttons in that area as we had to do after the first of April because he called together the Contact Group and from what they described, they met at a safari lodge somewhere. They cleared all the honeymooners out of a safari lodge for a weekend and they had this meeting there. I was not allowed in on it. But what people said was that the Russians, the Cubans, the Americans, the Angolans, they all said the same thing. SWAPO had done something very stupid and how do we get this peace process back on track. That is where they came up with this idea of the border points where the remaining SWAPO could safely go back to Angola. SWAPO was just a political party and, I think the real players were the South Africans, the Angolans, the Russians, the Americans.

JS: I want to ask a question about the old "Contact Group" from the Security Council; the ones that had worked out the plan for Namibia with the South Africans and the Front-line States. Let me put the question in context: in Cambodia the Special Representative there found it very, very useful to have a group of so-called "friends" and these were ambassadors from countries represented in the Security Council with whom he could consult on the various decisions that were being taken. I wonder was there anything comparable in the case of UNTAG? Did the Special Representative there have a group of

representatives? They were not ambassadors at that point, I guess, with whom he could consult and who would offer a kind of preferred channel to the Security Council?

FE: I don't actually know. I have already mentioned the Non-aligned Movement that had their representatives in Windhoek and who were at our headquarters all the time asking questions. In fact, I used to allow delegates to sit in the back of my briefing room everyday because my information was the cutting edge information on what was happening in the mission. As long as they didn't ask questions, the press said it was OK if they sat in the back. Those people were there. I seem to recall in addition to those representatives there were the Portuguese, the Brits, the Canadians. There were members of delegations who were interest sections from governments who were all over the place. They just seemed to be an integral part of our life. After the first of April, Ahtisaari had major fence mending to do. Whether there was a specific group from the Council, particularly this Contact Group that met as a group, all I can recall is the expanding group that included the Cubans, the Angolans, the South Africans, the Russians, and the Americans. That was the group that made things happen; that was the group that got the peace process back on track after the first of April. Those were the people that Ahtisaari had regular contact with.

JS: I want to go to a different field now. In the long period during which the United Nations claimed sovereignty in Namibia, but the South Africans were really administering it, there were groups established within the United Nations or individuals- there were in the Council for Namibia, the Commissioner for Namibia. They supposedly

were to be inactive because of the impartiality agreement during the transitional period. My question is: did you perceive any residual effect of the existence of these organizations that had worked so hard at the United Nations? Did anybody in Namibia even know that they had existed?

FE: I think that anyone familiar with the history of the place knew they existed. It was important for us to ignore them. As you mentioned, their inactivity was even built into the peace plan. I think we wanted for our purposes to pretend they never existed. We were starting from scratch with a peace plan to implement. I could be wrong, but I didn't sense that they improperly interfered at any time.

JS: Theoretically, they were supposed to have protected the national resources of Namibia during the period before the transition. Again, was there any evidence of that?

FE: I don't think they had any leverage at all in Namibia. They couldn't even visit Namibia. I think the main resource was diamonds and all of that was connected to South African diamond merchants.

JS: Which brings me to the question of Walvis Bay. I wondered were you under pressure from the press or the others to deal with this particular question, which was not part of the transition agreement?

FE: Yes, it was difficult to explain that there was an understanding that this would be dealt with eventually. It was set aside. Is that how they did it?

JS: Yes.

FE: They set it aside. We were convinced that the South Africans would turn it over, but it was hard to sell anything in Namibia and particularly to the press on the basis that we believed the South Africans were genuine in their assurances to us that it would be dealt with. And in the end it was.

JS: That is a rather surprising answer in a way, but it leads me to the question of: how did you perceive the attitude of the relatively sophisticated people whom you were dealing with toward the UN as an institution? What was their perception of the UN and did it change?

FE: There was a fair amount of skepticism among the press about first, the UN's ability to act impartially and second, its ability to deliver the goods because in the end, everyone had a sense of what the right outcome would be. It surprised everyone that Ahtisaari let the South African military out of base after SWAPO came over the border on the first of April. I think that shook up perceptions of this UN mission quite a lot. At the same time, it created huge problems. Maybe that was the single most important thing to happen to get people to take a fresh look at the UN as an instrument of change. But I felt we were fighting hard, particularly since the events of the first of April where we had

to come back and then win our credibility with the Africans, to regain our credibility with the Africans. Everyday was a battle for credibility, for acceptance as impartial agents in this rather complicated formula. Because it worked out in the end, we had full satisfaction in the end. The first six months or so were a real struggle.

JS: Again, I want to compare it with Cambodia. In Cambodia, the major issue was human rights and the question was: was the United Nations associated with the concept of human rights? This is the image that it exuded. Was this true in Namibia? In Namibia, as I understand it, the United Nations was very directly involved in what we now call the democratization process, the building of institutions. Was this popularly recognized? Did you find that the press and the others that you were associated with looked to the UN for this purpose?

FE: It became apparent to us early on that our very presence there opened up everyone's eyes. This was a country of something like 1.2 million people in an arid corner of Africa where not many people wanted to live. While there was a certain amount of ethnic diversity among them, they had never seen anything like the ethnic diversity that we brought in. And the fact that we worked so naturally together caught everyone's attention. That made us feel good about ourselves as well. We were like a walking human rights lesson. They wanted to know how many of us had been tested for aids before we got there because they saw themselves as morally upright and us as a bit corrupt, perhaps. I'm not sure that they saw an international presence as necessarily a

good thing, but our ability to work together made the biggest impression on them. They began to think that maybe they can do it themselves.

JS: You didn't need to distribute definitions of what human rights are and what human rights they were entitled to and so forth?

FE: The church groups there had strong influence on people's lives. Their sense of morality and what is politically right and wrong was out there even for those that didn't accept the political necessity of majority rule, at least initially. There was a sense that it was right. It wasn't a primitive society. I don't think we introduced new concepts to them; we just showed them how it could work.

JS: It is interesting that you mention the churches. Every one of the field officers I have talked to has emphasized the importance of the church in the community. That was their access. Did you find that true also from the center with the central church groups, or was this simply a matter of the local community church?

FE: I sense that it would be more pronounced in the small villages than at headquarters where we dealt with politicians. But when we wanted to distribute a pamphlet that is when we talked to civic groups and in particular to churches. They were the network over which you could get out a message, even in Windhoek. I was going to say more in Katutura, but that is not true. They were all churchgoers it seemed in Windhoek, whites, blacks, and coloureds.

JS: The churches did provide an element of civil society that could be utilized in building a nation.

FE: Yes, and they were.

JS: At one point, the Secretary-General came to Namibia, Pérez de Cuéllar, and he met with the leaders of all the political parties together. From your perspective as spokesman, did this play well? Did it have impact?

FE: I don't remember that it did. He came and went. Margaret Thatcher came and went. Maybe we weren't ready to cede any credit to outsiders. My memory is totally clouded, but I don't remember the Secretary-General's presence as being politically significant.

JS: Well, that answers the question, in a way. Just in comparison, was Martti Ahtisaari a well-known figure in Namibia?

FE: Everyone knew him. Actually, everyone in the country must have known him.

JS: So, you had an audience that was interested in what the chief UN man was doing?

FE: Yes, it was a process leading to a long anticipated goal that was now shared by the South Africans who were prepared to allow it to happen. This team of foreigners was coming in to make it happen and the guy at the top of that team was Martti Ahtisaari. I think there were Namibians all over the country at that time who were named after Martti.

JS: I believe that Finland, oddly enough, had had some influence in South West Africa, when it was still South West Africa, again largely through church support. Was that evident and did that seem to be one of the reasons that Martti Ahtisaari was there?

FE: I wasn't aware of that. For us, the main problem was the Finns' saunas. They took saunas wherever they went. Of course, not at UN expense but national government expense. Like Martti himself had a sauna. The other thing they did is that they saved up their money and they bought expensive cars. This was a little hard to explain. It was embarrassing to me from the point of view of press relations. But it was a standard fact of UN peacekeeping life that troops from developed countries that get well paid buy things and exercise influence on the economies of the places where they go.

JS: Yes, again to compare with Cambodia, in Cambodia the UN presence because of the influx of the money they brought with them made a difference, and possibly not a positive difference. Was it that great in Namibia?

FE: The numbers were smaller, but the size of the population was smaller than in Cambodia.

JS: The presence of UNTAG didn't bring about a sudden distortion in the economy, or would you say it did?

FE: My sense it that it did and that our departure left a sudden gap. Our departure was accompanied by a sudden drop in real estate prices. And the pledges of development assistance were very slow to come in. We must have had a substantial impact on the economy and then a negative impact when we left.

JS: There was another important player; that was the United States in the person of Chester Crocker. I wonder how was his role perceived among those that you were associating with in Namibia?

FE: I was aware that Ahtisaari had a close personal relationship with Crocker. I wasn't that aware of his direct influence on the process. We all sensed that big powers were behind the scenes pulling the strings, sometimes in a very positive way as they did after the first of April. The Americans had a substantial amount of influence over the South Africans. My sense was that Crocker was just one more lever for Martti to pull. The way he could call on the South African foreign ministry to get Pienaar in line, he could call on the Americans to get the South Africans in line. I wasn't that aware of Crocker's day-to-day involvement if that's what it was.

JS: As spokesman, you were not expected, or perhaps not able, to give word to the public and to the media on what happened in these rather crucial meetings among this group, that is the Cubans, the Angolans, and the South Africans with the Russians and the Americans looking on.

FE: When I got word about this meeting at the safari lodge where they all agreed – they all had the same conclusion that SWAPO had done something dumb – now that had to be fixed. I put that out. I didn't mention it at a briefing, but I privately told correspondents that that was the case. That was politically significant. There was major political power behind this peace plan and therefore, it was going to get back on track because if any one of them, the South Africans first on the list, wanted to get out of the Namibian peace plan, the first of April was the excuse. And instead, they all sat around the table and they said, "How do we put it back together." I wanted to illustrate the extent to which there was international support for the process.

JS: I want to go back to this question of democratization and human rights, for a minute. There was great emphasis, I believe, on preparing for the elections, right?

FE: Yes.

JS: And this was also true in Cambodia. The criticism has been frequently made in the case of Cambodia that there was so much emphasis on preparing for the elections that

there was insufficient attention given to the protection of human rights. I have not heard this criticism of the operation in Namibia. Why, in your view?

FE: Namibia hadn't experienced the genocide. The elections were the central event of the transition to independence and so if you emphasize the code of conduct of how people behave decently in an election, that you don't beat up the opposition and you don't tear down their posters and you let them speak and so on. That was human rights enough. There was also a human rights center in Windhoek that we worked very closely with, Cedric in particular. I wish I knew a little bit more about them and their work. But I know we supported them and we pulled them in on our deliberations. You ought to try to look into them. Come to think of it, they weren't based in Windhoek. They were based up north. I think it is a religious group or a religious base, the Namibian Center for Human Rights, or something like that.

JS: Which was an indigenous group?

FE: Yes.

JS: I'd like to go back to the question of relations with New York. You were on the information side. In your relation to New York, did you look to DPI [Department of Public Information] or to the 38th floor?

FE: Cedric had total disdain for DPI. He had disdain for a lot of things. He felt that DPI wasn't field oriented, wasn't operational, so his instructions to me were pretty much, "Ignore DPI; we'll do it ourselves." I had to go to DPI to get a designer, to get a TV producer, and so on because these were the professionals. Then we had to adapt those skills to fieldwork. So, I always felt that DPI was very supportive of me. And I called on individuals within DPI. I wouldn't call the director, the head of the Department. I would call a P5 or a P4 in TV and say, "Here's what we need down here. We're doing something good, but we need this." And they would make suggestions. So, I felt I had a lot of unofficial support from DPI. The information side of our work was technically under Anwar Charif, the Tunisian fellow that I mentioned, North African, in any case. He would have worked more classically within the DPI framework. But I had nothing bad to say about DPI despite my boss.

Another thing, if I can switch subject, he had disdain for was UN agencies. He said, "We are going to keep those agencies out of here as long as we can. It's not going to be easy." But, of course, they started drifting in well before the elections. And the way we see peacekeeping today, that is proper, that they would begin the development, the transition to the post-peacekeeping development phase while the peacekeeping operation is still underway. Here is a perfect example of why he felt these people were political blunderers and to be kept completely off the political stage for as long as possible for the good of the political process. FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization] came in with a plan distribute to all the newly returned refugees--through an irregularity of the peace process, many of whom were former SWAPO fighters who in civilians came across as refugees – distribute to these people a kit so that they could plant their first crop and gave

them all machetes. This absolutely terrified the white population that these SWAPO guys should be armed with machetes by FAO. We had to try to undo that. But that is part of the problem of working with a decentralized UN system when you have 12 months to do a very precise thing and you don't want anyone sullying the landscape.

JS: But UNHCR was active, right?

FE: Right, but they worked very closely with us. In fact, Cedric's ex-wife was a senior UNHCR official with responsibility for that region. Although she was his ex-wife, he had a working relationship with her. I remember her coming down a few times. But HCR as we saw in Bosnia, the reason they were given the lead by the Security Council was because they were so good at what they did. And they organized the repatriation in a very efficient way.

JS: That went well, right?

FE: That went very well. We knew that there were these SWAPO members coming over in civvies. But we decided as long as they didn't rearm on re-entry, we could afford to look the other way. I believe we convinced the South Africans and the Pienaar people that that was a gamble worth taking and they reluctantly went along with it. As it turned out it was just fine.

JS: Fred, looking back were there any Namibians who stood out in your mind as particularly gifted, particularly talented people who could be future leaders in the country?

FE: In what age group?

JS: I don't know. I guess you'd have to say the middle group, perhaps those who had been in exile.

FE: The outgoing Pienaar Administration was leaving in place a fair amount of the old bureaucracy and SWAPO, once they had won the election, had to kind of share power with some of the other parties. What impressed me first about SWAPO, as I mentioned earlier, is that apart from the first of April, that was the last serious mistake they made. They were almost statesmanlike. It seemed like the long years that they had spent in the UN, lobbying governments, building an international support base, made them smooth political operators. These were not country hicks. These were people who knew how to organize things and garner support for a political idea. They were an impressive lot. I think of the foreign minister, Theo-Ben Gurirab, just very natural, very confident.

JS: The reason that I ask this is because my colleague, Jean Krasno, is going to Namibia next month and will be interviewing Namibians, in the same way.

FE: I think it would be interesting to see what has cropped up in almost ten years. It would be interesting to see Namibians from what walks of life, from what ethnic groups, are they all Ovambo, the traditional base of SWAPO support, or have others felt that there are enough opportunities in the political sphere for them to move forward. I don't think there is any shortage of educated Namibians. There were so many in the Diaspora that seemed happy to come home. The economy seems to be doing well, so there are opportunities in business there. Among the younger people today, in all parts of the world, business has more allure than public service. I think that it would be interesting to see.

JS: That's true. For this project what we are interested in is those who had some awareness of what was going on during the transition process and who were vaguely familiar, at least, with what the United Nations and what you were doing, to get their assessment of how the UN functioned.

FE: People in their twenties who were teenagers at the time.

JS: Well, we would include Nujoma, in fact, we will be interviewing him. That generation had a lot to do with the UN in the years before. Nujoma apparently was a well-known character to the diplomats in New York and elsewhere. But there is no particular one who stands out in your mind that we should look up? Or in the press, for that matter.

FE: I wouldn't know who is still there. There was the woman who ran the *Namibian* that was seen as a pro-SWAPO paper but which did fairly serious journalism. Her name escapes me now. [Gwen Lister] She's of European decent.

JS: I really have a double question for the last question: the first part may be more difficult. What did you see, from your position, as the weakest point of the UNTAG operation?

FE: The structural one. It seemed like we had the talent; we had the political support; we had the willingness of the population to give it a go. But we were too slow to deploy and too slow to get up our communications links. By the time of the elections, we were up and running and at our peak. What gave us the greatest satisfaction is that under the plan, the South Africans or the local authorities were to announce the electoral results. And they had to gather numbers from all over the country, including from very obscure places. As the South African military pulled out, a lot of their communications infrastructure collapsed. So, they didn't have quite as reliable communications as we did. So, we were collecting the same numbers they were, but then we were sitting back and letting them announce it. But they were calling us to find out what the numbers were. Because they had incomplete returns. So, we were whispering to them what the numbers were and they were announcing it. That's when we felt that we finally had the upper hand because the South African infrastructure was formidable. Our infrastructure in the beginning was non-existent. One was gradually dismantled while the other one was built

up. We really felt our strength at the time of the voting because we knew exactly what the results were.

JS: That is the second part of the question because Namibia is generally considered, and rightly so, one of the most successful UN operations ever. What do you think were the strong points? Why is Namibia seen as a success? There is practically no criticism.

FE: I give credit first of all to the South Africans. They held most of the cards and they wanted this to happen. They wanted it to happen in a certain way, so they were manipulative, but we were moving in the same direction. If they had decided at any point to fight the process, it never would have happened. Next, we have both the Russians and the Americans, the South Africans and the Angolans also supporting the process. If any one of the key players wanted to throw a curve ball into this operation, they could have caused casualties; they could have thrown off the timetable; they could have made it go wrong in a lot of ways. It was just everyone pulling in the right direction. We went in there with our inadequate preparation, our insufficient knowledge of the place and we were carried along by this political tide that just moving us inexorably toward our goal. Even when SWAPO screwed up on the first of April, we stumbled, picked ourselves up and just kept going. There was such momentum that one practical obstacle after another fell before the weight of this pressure to succeed. Everyone wanted it and it happened. I don't think we take credit for it. It was geopolitical forces that couldn't be stopped, starting with South Africa's making a strategic decision to go to majority rule at home and to start with majority rule in Namibia.

JS: So, the cards were right, you are saying.

FE: Absolutely.

JS: Well, thank you very much.

FE: Sure.