

Voices of African Women Seminar Series

Parliamentary Forum: Wednesday 5 November, 2-6pm

House of Commons Committee Room 10, UK

Statement by Pauline Dempers, Breaking The Wall of Silence, Namibia

Honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour to speak to you as part of the Voices of African Women initiative. I appreciate your willingness to hear us, and your commitment to the issues that affect our lives, through your hosting of this event.

I would also like to thank Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the organisers. Networking is a strong and enabling tool, and these kinds of activities add value and meaning to our work. Being part of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) has provided an important point of contact with activists around the world. With their support, I am able to share my experiences and the work of my organisation, Breaking the Wall of Silence. In particular I would like to thank the IANSA Women's Network for creating this window of opportunity to speak on behalf of the women of my country.

Africa is a diverse region in almost all aspects of human life and wellbeing, rich in minerals yet plagued with extreme poverty where people live for less than a dollar per day. Poverty can be traced back to the days of colonial rule and still has a huge impact on the lives of Africans. However, all is not lost and what remains to be seen is how we, as Africans, reorganize ourselves, and redistribute the land and wealth of the Continent. In this, African women must fairly and squarely demand the dividends of their contribution to the emancipation of Africa.

I would like to talk about Namibia, the country of my birth, and some of the challenges we face today including issues of transitional justice and gun violence. Namibia was a German Colony until 1915 when the powers of occupation moved to Apartheid South Africa. This move was endorsed by the League of Nations and when the League dissolved in 1946, the newly formed United Nations inherited its supervisory authority for the territory until independence in 1990.

I appreciate and thank the UN Security Council and the international community for its role during our liberation struggle, including the UK government of the time. However, we feel that neither the international community, nor the UN, have assisted Namibia in dealing with issues of transitional justice.

I am a survivor of atrocities committed by the liberation movement during the liberation struggle while in exile. I am one of those who were saved by UN Resolution 435, whereby both parties (SWAPO and South

Africa) were instructed to release their political prisoners. I spent 3 years in the SWAPO dungeons and was released on 4th July 1989. SWAPO did not account for the atrocities they committed during the liberation, the fate and whereabouts of the missing persons (estimated at 2000) remain unknown, and relatives of missing persons are still searching for their loved ones.

On this issue, one of justice and accountability, we feel that both the UN and international community have compromised us, and did not adequately deal with the ramifications of the liberation struggle. Perhaps in your mind you may think, but why blame us for your issues? The fact that the UN General Assembly gave the status of 'sole and authentic representative' of the Namibian people to SWAPO was a mistake in itself, because the liberation struggle was not waged by SWAPO alone, nor did it start with SWAPO. This declaration by the UN General Assembly has undermined the contributions from other individuals and organizations and the effects are still being felt today.

Another reason why we feel and believe that the UN still has a role to play is its mandate to be responsible and act as custodian for the Namibian people. The peace plan for Namibia was not designed in such a way to pave the way for issues of transitional justice and this is what is haunting the Namibian nation today.

It is against this background that the survivors formed a human rights organization called Breaking The Wall of Silence. We have activities such as documentation, advocacy and lobbying, awareness raising, networking and regional outreach in order to respond to the challenges facing survivors, and to find a peaceful lasting solution for the SWAPO ex-detainee issue. Our work also focuses on the effects of gun violence on our country, violence with weapons often associated with the process of national liberation.

Although Namibia experienced a dramatic increase in violence during the liberation period, guns remain a feature of the national landscape. During my imprisonment I became aware of the power associated with gun ownership. I was beaten and tortured at gunpoint and was certain that I would be killed during each session. As a result I became acutely aware of the levels of violence that can be engineered through the presence of guns.

BWS lobbies for amendments to Namibia's gun law and campaigns for the establishment of gun-free zones at public places to discourage private ownership of guns and highlight the impact of gun violence. We coordinate the Gun Free Namibia Project and to date there are 30 declared Gun Free Zones.

Insecurity fuels the cycle of violence and leads to demand for weapons. This sense of insecurity is fuelled by poverty, lack of employment and education opportunities, but also by the absence of justice and a culture of impunity. Guns have become the currency of violence in Namibia. Some argue that Namibia needs guns because it is a hunting nation. Yet women are being hunted down with the same guns that are being used

for hunting wild animals Statistics show that from 2002 to the end of 2006, almost 900 crimes were committed with guns in Namibia. 317 of these were murders, of which the majority of victims were female.

There is a lot of work on violence against women, but the aspect of weapons is overlooked – maybe because it's too technical, or because it's not the fundamental cause. However, we must remember that for every time a gun is used to actually shoot someone, there are likely to be many more times when it is used to threaten. This has specific impacts upon women including in sexual violence and intimidation at home.

We call upon peace loving people and UK parliamentarians to assist Namibia to deal with the transitional justice issues, more so the issue of the SWAPO ex-detainees of which I am one. We have learnt from other nations around the world that issues of this nature when postponed and ignored can have fatal consequences for a nation.

Similarly we call for support in our efforts to tackle gun violence. Gun crime and the availability of guns is complex. We believe there is no single solution, but we can assist in reducing gun crime through the strategies we employ. Gun control is of course a vitally important issue in not only Namibia, but other African societies, especially those that have emerged from struggle and war, and where there is a proliferation of small arms.