

**STATEMENT TO PARLIAMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
ON NAMIBIA  
6 MARCH 1989**

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Madam Speaker,

I seek to leave to report to the House on recent events in Namibia and Australia's role in assisting the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435 of 1978, providing for the withdrawal of South African military forces from Namibia and the holding of elections under UN supervision and control

As announced by the Ministers for Defence and Foreign Affairs and Trade on 2 March 1989, a contingent of three hundred Australian engineers will leave shortly for Namibia. They will form part of a United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Namibia that will help bring independence to Namibia after more than one hundred years of rule by foreign powers.

The settlement of the long and complex issue of Namibian independence is an important international event. It is an event in which Australia has played, and will continue to play, a substantial part.

During my recent visit to India, I noted that there had been much talk during the 1970s and early 1980s about an arc of instability stretching from southern Africa, through the Persian Gulf, through Afghanistan and South Asia and on to Indochina. We see now, if not an arc of peace, than at least an arc of peace-making. It is a process, facilitated by an improvement in superpower relations and aided by the constructive role of the United Nations, that is finally bringing the treasured goal of independence within sight of the people of Namibia.

My Government recognises that the problems in southern Africa constitute one of the major challenges facing the international community. We have sought, through the United Nations, the Commonwealth and our own diplomatic links with countries in the region, to find peaceful solutions to the complex set of problems that trouble that region.

In recent times, there has been little cause for optimism in southern Africa. The offensive doctrine of apartheid remains entrenched in South Africa's social, political and economic life. Civil wars with drastic human consequences continue in Mozambique and Angola. The Front Line States of southern Africa - including fellow Commonwealth members such as Botswana, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe - continue to be vulnerable to economic and military destabilisation. The question of Namibia, in many ways, encapsulated a number of these problems.

The fact that Namibia is now on the way to independence demonstrates that concerted international action, the determination of the region, and the goodwill of individual players can combine to bring solutions to longstanding problems in the region. For a southern Africa torn by attrition, deprivation and tragedy, recent moves on Namibia offer a glimmer of hope.

The problem of Namibia has been with the international community for close on 70 Years. South Africa was appointed mandatary over the former German colony of South West Africa by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, in circumstances similar to Australia's own mandate over Papua New Guinea. This mandate was confirmed by the League of Nations.

After the Second World War, the League of Nations was superseded by the United Nations, and the mandate system by the trusteeship system. Alone of the former mandatary powers, South Africa refused to submit a trusteeship agreement for South West Africa, or Namibia, as it is now known. In 1966, the UN General Assembly resolved that South Africa's role in Namibia should be terminated, and that the responsibility for the territory should be assumed by a UN-appointed Council for Namibia. Despite these decisions, South Africa continued to govern Namibia against the wishes of the United Nations, and claimed sovereignty over it in the face of widespread international condemnation.

South African rule has been opposed from within Namibia since 1957 by the South West African People's Organisation, SWAPO. SWAPO commenced an armed struggle in 1966, and was supported in this by Namibia's neighbour to the north, Angola, when it achieved independence in 1975.

South Africa responded by supporting an insurgency against the Government of Angola, and by direct attacks against Angolan Government forces inside Angola. Angola sought Cuban involvement and as many as 50,000 Cuban troops have been deployed there at any one time. This involvement, with substantial Soviet backing, became a significant source of East-West tension.

It has taken years to begin to untangle this mess. In 1978 the UN agreed on a plan for a settlement contained in UN Security Council Resolution 435, but intransigence on all sides prevented that plan from being implemented. Then last year, in the context of reduced East-West tensions, the log-jam started to break up. South Africa agreed to withdraw its forces and to allow Namibia its independence, while Angola agreed to the withdrawal of Cuban forces and the removal of African National Congress camps from its territory. The signing of the Brazzaville Protocol on 22 December last year by South Africa, Cuba and Angola has at last formalised the acceptance by South Africa of the 1978 UN settlement plan.

Last month the UN Security Council agreed that the transition to independence for Namibia would begin on 1 April 1989. Over the 12 months from that date the UN will monitor the withdrawal of foreign forces, oversee the drafting and adoption of a Constitution, and supervise the installation of a new Government after general elections.

A vital element in this plan is the United Nations Transition Assistance Group, UNTAG. It will monitor the ceasefire and troop withdrawals, supervise elections, and support the maintenance of law and order in Namibia until the new government of independent Namibia is ready to take over.

The scale of these tasks is reflected in the size of the force. UNTAG will have civilian, police and military elements. The military element will consist initially of 4,650 personnel including three infantry battalions, with scope for expansion to 7,500 should the circumstances demand.

Australia is providing the engineering component of UNTAG. Our contingent of 23 officers and 277 other ranks will provide engineering and construction support to the UN effort. Such support will be sorely needed. Namibia is a large, arid, sparsely-populated and underdeveloped country which has been a war zone for many years. Our engineers will build roads, bridges, airstrips and camps for UNTAG. They will have the very serious task of clearing mines which have been laid by the various contending forces along the border between Angola and Namibia.

This is of course not the first time Australian personnel have been involved with a peacekeeping force in Africa; we participated in the Commonwealth force that monitored Zimbabwe's transition to independence in 1980. In that process, as in others before and since, Australian defence forces played a constructive role in what can be a difficult and sometimes dangerous process.

Members of the Australian contingent will serve in Namibia for tours of six months, after which they will be replaced by a fresh contingent from Australia. The UN plans to complete Namibia's transition to independence within a year, but delays in this complex process are possible, and we may be called upon to stay longer than a year.

The bulk of the Australian contingent will be based at Grootfontein in the north of Namibia, near the border with Angola. Elements of the contingent could be required to deploy into neighbouring countries to support UNTAG operations there.

This is a very large and important commitment for Australia, comprising almost half of the Army's construction engineering capability. Careful planning, including the use of Reservists, has been required to ensure that high-priority engineering tasks closer to home can still be performed.

I am pleased to say that it has been possible to minimise the impact of the deployment on support to the operational deployment force, exercise Kangaroo 89, and the defence cooperation program in the South Pacific, where our engineers build wharves, airstrips and other essential infrastructure.

It has to be understood that the political and military situation in the border region where the bulk of our men will be deployed will remain uncertain and outbreaks of fighting cannot be ruled out. Members of the Australian contingent will travel often on minor and remote roads. They will be responsible for the dangerous work of clearing mines throughout the country. Threats are also posed by disease and the harsh environment.

Against these dangers should be set the fact that our service personnel are experts in their profession; they are well trained and will be armed for self-defence.

I can assure Honourable Members that the safety of the Australian contingent is uppermost in my mind. To ensure that we are kept fully informed of developments that may affect the well-being of the Australian contingent, the Government has decided to establish a temporary Australian Liaison Office in the Namibian capital of Windhoek for the duration of the 12 month independence process. The Office will provide the Government with first hand reporting on political and military developments in the territory, during what at times is likely to be a difficult process. The Office will be headed by an experienced diplomat with many years background in African affairs.

The Government has also ensured that members of the Australian contingent be adequately compensated for the hardships and dangers they will face through a comprehensive and generous set of conditions of service, including the payment of special allowances. In addition, the Treasurer will be seeking an amendment to the Income Tax Assessment Act to exempt the pay and allowances earned by Defence Force personnel while they are on tour with UNTAG. Repatriation benefits appropriate to the tasks and hazards encountered will also be provided.

Madam Speaker, our contribution to UNTAG and our involvement in the Namibian settlement makes Australia party to what may be one of the United Nations' most substantial achievements for many years. We have been involved in this process from the start. Australia has been a member of the UN Council for Namibia since 1974. We pledged our support for UNTAG at the inception of the UN plan for Namibia in 1978. Australia also made an important contribution to UN deliberations about Namibia during our recent term on the UN Security Council in 1985-86.

Our participation in UNTAG also builds on the constructive role successive Australian Governments have played on southern African issues. I pay particular tribute to the achievements of my predecessor Malcolm Fraser in this regard. Our decisive contribution to the attainment of independence by Zimbabwe, Australia's leading role in the Commonwealth on southern Africa affairs, our bilateral aid support for the member countries of the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference all speak of a firm commitment to peace and stability in that region. Our involvement in the Eminent Person's Group was only one demonstration of our longstanding determination to work constructively to bring about an end to the repugnant policies of apartheid.

I believe that the Namibian settlement, together with the resolution of the Iran-Iraq war and the end of Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, marks a renewal of faith in the UN as an effective participant in international affairs after many years of cynicism and apathy about its role. The UN belongs on the centre stage of world affairs, not in the wings, and it is very encouraging that more and more countries are recognising this. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the efforts of Martti Ahtisaari, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative on Namibia, for his important role, and those of the late Bernt Carlsson, the UN Commissioner for Namibia, who was tragically killed in the Lockerbie air disaster.

I would like to think that Namibia's transition to independence will proceed to plan and that there will be no major setbacks. But such things are never certain. Our effort in Namibia will be the largest peacekeeping commitment in which this country has ever participated. It may also be the most difficult. I am sure that all Honourable Members of this House, and the people of Australia join me in wishing our troops well in their endeavours. We do so in the knowledge that they will make an outstanding contribution to the future peace and prosperity of an independent Namibian people and a more stable region.

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