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“Namibia”

“I will not be free until they are free,” said Herman Toivo Ya Tovia, the “Father of Namibian nationalism” in April of 1984 (Foy). These words were spoken during a time of struggle for Namibia. They wanted freedom. Approximately six years later, they got it. South Africa granted Namibian independence much to the delight of the South West African People’s Organization (Swapo), the country’s dominating political party then and now. The Republic of Namibia is now, however, a troubled multi-party democracy. Although free of foreign dominance since 1990, severe drought, rampant disease (malaria, pneumonia, AIDS, etc.), political turmoil and overall desperation has put Namibia in a state of dire need and “exceptional food emergency” (Martin, Namibia).

Namibia hasn’t always been a nation in need. Before European imperialism, Namibia was a country rich in resources and strong trade between tribes and ethnic groups. Other than Europe, South Africa has been a heavy influence on Namibia since the 18th century -- first, economically and then by complete and utter control (Martin, Namibia). With so much outside influence, Namibia suddenly shifted from predominantly agricultural to providing exports such as ostrich feathers, ivory, cotton and tobacco back to Europe. Although profitable for the white tradesmen, fields of cotton and tobacco don’t feed a hungry people and have, if anything, robbed some of the once fertile land of its natural capacity to yield sustenance for its people. So what went wrong?

Historically, Germany occupied and exploited Namibian natural resources and the people themselves from 1884 - 1919 leading in a severe uprising against colonial control. This revolt led to the loss of approximately 70% of the Herero, Damara and Nama tribes. After World War I, the newly found League of Nations mandated control from a bitterly defeated Germany to South Africa. The Namibian people believed they were being, once again, taken advantage of economically and furthermore, South Africa’s introduction of apartheid created extreme national discontent. Namibia appealed to the International Court of Justice over the 1950s - 1960s three times regarding UN control, and in 1966 the UN finally disintegrated South African occupation and control in Namibia. After the decision was upheld in 1971, the struggle was now to annihilate South African presence altogether to achieve true freedom by being completely independent (Martin, Namibia).

No political group epitomizes Namibian nationalism more than Swapo (Foy). Originally a peaceful group that sought an end to South African dominance and apartheid, it wasn’t until December of 1959 when 13 people were killed and over 50 wounded during a peaceful protest outside of Windhoek (Namibia’s capitol). After this event, known as the “Namibian Sharperville“, Swapo began guerilla warfare tactics, resulting in both sides becoming more and more violent (Martin, Namibia). After United States’ President Ronald Reagan was elected in 1981, Cuban troops withdrew from the neighboring country, Angola, and the encouraged U.S. began to “attempt to bring stability” to the region (Cummins). So far that task has proven to be one in which nobody will easily avail.

Bringing stability to the region has been extremely difficult. Diplomatic struggles in Caprivi (a northern region of Namibia) post-independence have been such as a sovereignty dispute with Botswana over small islands found in the border waters and, most importantly, the rivalry for control between the Masubra and Mawafe tribes who mainly support Swapo. In the December 1999 Presidential and Parliamentary elections, Swapo won another overwhelming majority despite the threat of another newly formed opposing party, The Congress of Democrats (CoD). However strong the Namibian people’s support may be, Swapo seems to be delivering slowly. Rural Namibians, political corruption, diplomatic

relations and so on are struggling under Swapo rule. Once again, Namibia is struggling -- but this time, its against itself (but of course, still with South Africa to a degree).

Namibia is not entirely independent from South Africa today. The country still heavily depends on foreign aid and donations. With a nearly 10% inflation rate and a slowly expanding economy the monetary future of Namibia is uncertain (St. Jorre). Most of the non-sustenance farming industry belongs to white industrial men (as well as most of the diamond mines) (Murray). The lack of infrastructure means that Namibia is now turning back to South Africa for support -- a form of dependence yet again (Martin, Southern Africa). Another aspect of Namibian economic struggle is the unemployment. President Nujoma of Swapo originally promised 50,000 jobs during his campaign and has only created a mere 600 (Murray). Most jobs available are related to the mining industry, working in commercial farms, teaching in rural communities (paid by the government), and working in the bank structure. Some of these jobs are unbelievably hard to attain because political affiliations often merit a job rather than merit alone (Fritz). It is believed that the best way to save the economy is to diversify.

Hunger in Namibia is not diverse; it's widespread and extremely detrimental to the functioning of their society. One aspect of nation-wide hunger is whether or not the person in question is rural or urban. The majority of Namibians are rural, very rural, however; there are many people in the cities that are shockingly poor as well. In fact, poverty may be worse in the city because rural poor people will often venture to the city to find a better way of life, get there, realize there are no jobs, and end up in the ghetto with no family and no way to get home. The only people commonly seen normal to overweight also happen to be in the city, but are mostly white, tourists, or business moguls (Fritz). So who really are the hungry people?

The poor and the disadvantaged are the hungry people. Namibia's situation is unique because of colonization and segregation, and the fact that there is more poverty along tribal groups. Ultimately, its everywhere. There are too many cash crops and not enough indigenous agriculture to sustain the country who grows it. Most of the arable land is owned by cash crop farmers, so the native families are left with desert, primitive tools, and little to no knowledge about how to feed themselves (Fritz).

Most native families are typically extended and extremely close. Something unique about Namibia is that sometimes a husband and wife won't live together because one has traveled to find work, so the other who stays home often moves in with his or her parents or their in-laws. Men are rare in rural areas because its common for men to move to commercial areas to make a living. The rest of the family usually stays behind because moving to the city would be too expensive. The reality becomes not only a struggle to survive economically, but as a family as well. In order to survive as well as keep family ties, relatives often live with one another to form a bigger "extended" family that functions as one unit.

A normal extended family in Namibia is about 10 people. The degree of poverty and hunger mostly depends on where the family is located because the northern part of Namibia has better land and therefore more self-sufficient farmers while the southern part of Namibia has barren land and therefore people who cannot self suffice -- in fact, most of those people are so poor that they can't even buy anything to get them started farming in the first place. In response to the desperate circumstances, they simply build around the relatives and hope for the best (Fritz).

Despite efforts, the situation still remains severe and unresolved. Approximately 25% of the food needed, nutritional requirements, and income for a family is being attained (Fritz). The environment is definitely being degraded from industry -- there are many over polluted rivers from everyday use and lack of environmental protection knowledge. Mining, especially strip mining, and agricultural practices don't practice environmentally save methods. Women are "2nd class citizens," because Namibia is definitely a male-dominated society (along with the household), yet it the attitude toward women is still better than

many African countries (Fritz).

Presently, Namibia is becoming more urban (the trends are measured in population distribution), but sometimes rural life is harder than city life. There are also very few city facilities, and none in the rural areas. Regardless of the lack of city facilities, there is a good water well system in Namibia and very few people are thirsty. The Namibian government also started a free antiretroviral treatment program for the many families suffering from HIV/AIDS that need treatment and can't afford health care. The program is reaching people, but isn't as successful as it should be because of distribution and many people cannot afford to leave their homes to seek a doctor or travel at all in general (Fritz). The situation is changing, slowly, because of the shift in type of lifestyle (rural or urban) and that the government recognizes that the people are in need. Because of this change, the situation for the average Namibian family is improving.

One issue which needs to be addressed is the HIV/AIDS epidemic with about 21% of the population infected, this disease has the potential to cripple any amount of progress that Namibia has made (Murray). AIDS is something faced everyday, and because it is so prevalent, its evident -- but is still somewhat of a taboo. There are still many stigmas that are tagged onto a person who is HIV-positive or living with AIDS, and it causes despair. Many people are in denial of the AIDS epidemic, and its sometimes even seen in leaders because it boils down to a cultural issue. Sex is absolutely unmentionable in Namibia, therefore education, condoms, pamphlets...all have no bearing when the people wont even acknowledge that it's a problem or that they are at risk (Fritz).

Even as the government is willing to distribute free ARV drugs, a huge problem lies in the fact that in order to take the drugs, one must take them with food. If there isn't any food available, the person becomes even sicker. Also, nutritious foods are more expensive such as fruit and beef. Soup kitchens help AIDS patients immensely because it gives the people something to eat with their medicine. The best way to combat AIDS is to educate about risky behavior and also how to grow their own personal gardens to provide food for themselves because everyday nutrition is a key part of a healthy immune system (Elrich).

Improving the quality of rural life would improve the amount of food, nutrition and income for the average Namibian family anywhere. If the rural farmers learned how to plant crops that are native to the land and offer a stable source of food, biodiversity could still be sustained while the three said factors would simultaneously improve. If men could sustain their families in rural areas, there would be no need to move to the city and therefore family stability could be maintained and less poverty would be found in urban areas. Women would benefit because they would have a partner home who could help with providing for the family, while the developing country as whole would benefit from the increased economic activity and relying less on foreign aid because they could supply their own food and jobs.

A recommendation for improving Namibia's international economy would be to diversify (St. Jorre). A diversification possibility is urging Namibia to become an energy exporter through gas-generated electricity and piping gas to South Africa (Murray). This is called the Kudu project because, recently, a gas field in Kudu was found and is estimated to have resources of about 560 billion cubic meters of gas (Murray). Although this project would be extremely profitable for Namibia, many special interest groups oppose it because of the location -- especially hydroelectric because of the water complications. Presently, the two industries most focused on are the diamond and fishing industries. At any rate, even if the said industries grow -- the still don't feed a hungry nation.

Therefore, education will feed a hungry nation. If people were better educated, they could become better citizens with higher skilled jobs or simply learn how to properly raise crops and sustain themselves and the people around them. Improving the status and education of women would be

extremely beneficial as well because women often end up being the ones who provide for the family on a day to day basis in labor and care taking. A huge part of Namibia's future lies in the hands of women (Cummins). The biggest investments that Namibia needs are infrastructure -- education, health care, and exchange of skills. Building a strong economy will benefit everybody because people function better if they have faith in their government and a certainty that there will be food on the table tomorrow (Fritz). Christian religious groups such as Catholic Aid Organization, could do more mission trips to help educate rural Namibians on farming practices because most Namibians are Christian.

National governments and international organizations could improve Namibia's situation by decreasing trade barriers because Namibia simply can't compete on an international level. Necessary taxes need to be implemented. If the government were to increase tariffs on exported diamonds and decrease import tariffs, Namibia may be able to compete on a global scale, however; the country still is in dire need of investment in education and healthcare to build an economy with a "backbone" before it goes international (Fritz).

Namibia has been a nation of long standing strife -- with great victories and great defeats. Ultimately, fantastic leadership will need to be implemented and empowering the people as a whole will begin to revive the national attitude from one of despair to one of genuine hope. Tovia Ya Tovia captures the essence of Namibian pride when he said, "We are Namibians and not South Africans. We do not recognize and will never recognize that you have the right to govern us..." (Foy). The question now is, is it possible for Namibia to govern itself?

Granted Namibia has only been independent for 15 years, it is still in the relatively new stages of development. Nevertheless, given the conditions, it will be extremely hard to create a nation totally independent and self sufficient -- not only are they facing environmental hardships, but also health, economic, social and political. The average life expectancy in Namibia is 41 years old: almost half of what it is in America today. The average age in Namibia is 19 (Martin, Namibia). This country now has to work with a young population in anguish.

The recommendations are all easier said than done, but one thing in common is that it all ties back to food -- and most importantly, money. If people are better fed, they will be able to work more if they are confident that they will be able to have food tomorrow. Giving people faith in tomorrow will improve today. It will also help fight corruption because when people get desperate, corruption emerges. If the desperation is eliminated, corruption will quietly disappear into the shadows again. If people are not frantically concerned about food, they will have time to be concerned about other things such as politics, education and functioning as a citizen, not just fighting for survival into tomorrow.

Food is not just for survival, it's also for stability. Better nutrition will offer the stability of fighting disease and increasing life expectancy, as well as improve quality of life, work ethic, and family ties. A better informed and more satisfied citizen of any country will function at a higher level and give back to their government, community and family and selves: therefore improving the situation as a whole. Ultimately, the fate of Namibia is in the individual. After all, the journey of 10,000 miles begins with a single person's single step.

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