

NAMIBIAN INDEPENDENCE

"I consider the Non-Aligned Movement to be one of our greatest supporters; if we did not have this support, I would not be here today." (Nelson Mandela, 22 March 1990, Windhoek, in talks with the chairman of the non-aligned countries, Dr Janez Drnovšek.)

I attended the declaration of independence in Namibia on 21 March 1990. This was one of the great victories of the Non-Aligned Movement. One of the main priorities of the movement was the struggle against apartheid and support for the SWAPO freedom movement in Namibia. At that time South African President F.W. de Klerk had initiated his policy of gradually dismantling apartheid. A short time before, I had read his speech, in which he declared himself in favour of a change in the system of racial differentiation. This seemed to me a very courageous act in the South African situation of that time. Just as it had released Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in prison, South Africa now agreed to the independence of Namibia.

The Namibian declaration of independence was attended by a great number of political leaders, mostly of course from Africa. The Americans

were represented by Secretary of State James Baker, while the Soviet Union sent foreign minister Edvard Shevardnadze. I had meetings with them both in Namibia. My meeting with James Baker was particularly interesting, since he had been following very closely developments in Yugoslavia, especially the progress of the multiparty system and events in Kosovo. I also met a number of other leaders, including of course the host, new President Samuel Nujoma.

Excerpt from the official minutes of the meeting with James Baker, 21 March 1990 in Windhoek:

"In response to Mr Baker's question about the current situation in Kosovo, Drnovšek said that it was somewhat calmer now and that we were seeking a political solution through peaceful means, through dialogue which would include unofficial, alternative organisations. Emotions are running high. Both sides are reacting very strongly, so we are moving ahead step by step, very cautiously. We are trying to orientate ourselves around protection of human rights. The Presidency will pardon all political prisoners convicted of non-violent acts."

Namibia surprised me. Windhoek was a very attractive city, very clean and nicely arranged. I hope it has remained so following independence. The celebrations themselves were nothing special. President de Klerk gave an interesting and quite emotional speech. At the celebratory dinner I talked to some of the South African ministers who had taken part in the solemnities. In fact, the whole time prior to my departure and also during my stay in Namibia, the main question for me was should I meet with South African President de Klerk. Yugoslavia and South Africa had no links whatsoever. Yugoslavia had strongly condemned South Africa and apartheid. The greatest possible diplomatic heresy was to have any kind of contact with the South Africans. When I mentioned to Lončar, who was with me again, that I had been thinking about a possible meeting, he reacted extremely negatively and advised me against any form of contact. But I persisted, and arranged a meeting with de Klerk over the heads of Lončar and the Yugoslav foreign ministry. Lončar declined to participate, and did not want to accompany me to the South African residence, where I was awaited by the South African delegation headed by de Klerk. I was accompanied only by the diplomatic adviser to the President, Dr Pavle Jevremović. He was the only one who wanted to come with me.

President de Klerk and the whole South African delegation were delighted and honoured by the meeting. During the talks it was impossible for us to conceal our pleasure. They knew about the orthodox Yugoslav stance, and it was clear to them what my step meant. I formed a very genuine relationship with President de Klerk. We met again that same evening at dinner, where we had quite a long discussion as we sat there together. In later years we met again several times. He was one of the most interesting people I met at that time in international politics. And the South Africans paid considerable attention in the media to this meeting. I offered a special greeting to the Yugoslav emigres – quite a large number of Croatians, and also some Slovenes, live in South Africa. President de Klerk and foreign minister Pik Botha said at the time that they would never forget this meeting, and this gesture I had made. I then had another disagreeable conversation with foreign minister Lončar about this business, so I asked him how he could say that it was unseemly of me to meet de Klerk, when he had been courageous enough to free Mandela after 27 years in prison. Back home we had been holding Adem Demači in prison for 28 years. I had already spent some time fighting for the release of Demači and the other remaining political prisoners.

There was also an interesting story surrounding Mandela. As soon as we arrived in Namibia, the Yugoslav representatives set about arranging a meeting with Mandela. This was quite soon after his release from prison, and Mandela was a huge media star. These were his first international appearances, and everyone wanted to talk to him. Curiously enough, there was no reply from Mandela's office either on the first or the second day. On the third day, after I had met de Klerk, a reply came immediately from Mandela's office, that he also wished to meet me. I had clearly become a much more interesting proposition to Mandela after my meeting with de Klerk. The conversation was stimulating, and indirectly he hinted at disapproval of my meeting with de Klerk. Mandela's performance was much more polished and diplomatic than many other of the world leaders who had years of presidential training behind them. I told him in response that I had some serious reasons for meeting de Klerk – the independence of Namibia, the start of the process of dismantling apartheid, and his freeing of Mandela.

The journey to Namibia was long. I travelled in a special federal aircraft,

a Falcon, which had to stop twice en route. First we touched down in Sudan, where at the airport I met representatives of the military junta which was then ruling the country. This was a truly exotic meeting, very late at night. We continued on to Nairobi in Kenya. After a few hours of sleep, we got up early in the morning and I went to a meeting with Kenyan President Arap Moi. I remember his residence, a house very nicely laid out in the British colonial style, and President Arap Moi with an ivory stick in his hand. We talked about non-alignment. Tito was still a great and important name. From Kenya we made the final leg of the journey to Windhoek in Namibia. We were received at the airport with tribal dancing and traditional African events. We returned by a different route. First we stopped in Gabon. This was supposed to be simply a refuelling stop after seven hours in the air. I expected that I would just be able to stretch my legs a little, and then continue the journey. But when the plane touched down at the airport in Libreville, the longest guard of honour I have ever seen was waiting for me. All the eminent politicians of Gabon had turned up, and it seemed all the journalists had, too. I had to review the guard of honour, go through welcoming ceremonies, listen to the national anthem, talk to the leading politicians and give a press conference in French. And all this in one hour, which was the time allocated for our refuelling stop. This was an example of the work of an over-zealous embassy, such as we had in Gabon, which had whipped the locals into a frenzy. On the other hand, it was also a consequence of presiding over the Non-Aligned Movement, which in these countries was regarded as the highest possible office, meriting the highest possible honour. The whole thing was very interesting for the spectators, but for me it was very arduous. From Gabon we continued to Senegal, where our stopover was to include an official visit. I was met at the airport by President Abdou Diouf and his entourage. I reviewed the guard of honour, and the military band played a very nice march. At the airport there were again ceremonies and a press conference, followed by official talks with President Diouf, with whom I spent a good deal of time and talked to at length during the visit. In general the Senegalese politicians, particularly the foreign minister, were very well-informed and interesting people. I visited the island close to Dakar where in the last century slaves had been brought before transportation to America. This is one of the major memorial sites in Senegal. In some village a cultural programme had

been prepared for me, complete with a gift of their traditional costume. After the official dinner, a Slovene woman came to the residence asking to speak to me. They wanted to send her away without troubling me, but I said that I would see her. She had lived for some time in Senegal and simply wished to see me and greet me. She mentioned that she was thinking of coming back to Slovenia soon, so I asked her why not come with us now? At first she looked stunned, then she quickly packed up her things and the next morning left Senegal with us, arriving directly back in Ljubljana. I have not seen her since, but it must have been quite an unusual episode for her.