

# Hammar skjöld's visit to South Africa

*Chris Saunders\**

## Abstract

In the last eighteen months of his life Dag Hammar skjöld was taken up with two major African issues, the Congo and South Africa. In the Congo he organised a United Nations (UN) mission to stabilise the country as it threatened to collapse into chaos following decolonisation; in South Africa he tried to deal with the conflict situation after the Sharpeville massacre by engaging in discussions with the South African Prime Minister, Hendrik Verwoerd. For that purpose he made a long-delayed visit to South Africa in January 1961. What did he try to achieve through his contacts with the South African government, and what other significance did his visit have for the unfolding history of apartheid and the struggle against it? This paper will focus on these questions, while a more substantial version, with detailed references to the sources upon which it is based, will be presented to the Dag Hammar skjöld Foundation in mid-2011 as part of the commemorations marking fifty years since Hammar skjöld's death.

---

\* Chris Saunders is Emeritus Professor of the University of Cape Town, where he has been Professor in the Department of Historical Studies. Currently he is a Research Associate at the Centre for Conflict Resolution, Cape Town. He wishes to thank Jack Zawistowski of the Royal Library, Stockholm, for sending him photocopies of the relevant files from the Hammar skjöld Papers, and J.F. (Frikkie) Botha for granting him an interview. Full references to the archival material drawn upon for this paper will be given in the longer version that will be submitted to the Dag Hammar skjöld Foundation.

## Background

From soon after he became Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) in 1953, Hammarskjöld had to deal with Southern African issues, but they did not loom large before 1960. Throughout the 1950s there was the mounting criticism at the UN of South Africa's apartheid policy and a UN Commission on the Racial Situation in the Union of South Africa (UNCORS) much annoyed the South African government, which kept repeating its claim that the UN had no role to play, because apartheid was a domestic affair and article 2 in chapter 7 of the UN Charter said that nothing in the Charter 'shall authorise the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state' (United Nations [1945]:5). Also in the 1950s there was a growing campaign at the UN to challenge South Africa's occupation of its de facto colony of South West Africa, where it was implementing apartheid policies. From the late 1940s the Herero people of that territory had, through their Chiefs' Council, been petitioning the UN and asking that the UN should take over the mandate role of the League of Nations and end South African rule of South West Africa. By the end of the 1950s, thanks in part to the advocacy work of the Reverend Michael Scott, long-time petitioner at the UN, a case was being brought before the International Court on this issue (Saunders 2007; Irwin 2010). After the police shooting in Windhoek, the capital of South West Africa, in December that year, in which twelve unarmed protestors were killed, the South African government hinted that it would not welcome the UN Secretary-General making a visit to South West Africa, but nothing came of the idea that he visit Southern Africa at that time. When later UN Secretaries-General visited Southern Africa, they did so chiefly in relation to the Namibian issue – Dr Kurt Waldheim in 1972 and Pérez de Cuéllar in 1982 (Du Pisani 1985:217; De Cuéllar (1997).

It was the apartheid issue, as a conflict situation of potential international significance, that took Hammarskjöld to South Africa. His visit followed another police shooting – this time of unarmed protestors against the pass laws at Sharpeville, south of Johannesburg, on 21 March 1960 – and on the same day yet another shooting in the township of Langa outside Cape Town. Until this time, neither the apartheid issue nor that of South West Africa had been taken to the UN Security Council, but after the Sharpeville massacre, and as further violence and unrest followed, a group of African and Asian members of the UN urgently requested the Council to consider the matter, as having 'grave potentialities for international friction, which endangers the maintenance of international peace and security' (United Nations 1994:244). As the Council discussed an appropriate resolution to indicate the world body's abhorrence at what apartheid meant, the South African government declared a state of emergency on 30 March. Two days later (critics of the UN in South Africa were quick to point out that it was April Fool's day) the Council, by nine votes to none, with two abstentions, adopted resolution 134, which deplored 'the policies and actions of the Government of the Union of South Africa which have given rise to the present situation', called upon that government 'to initiate measures aimed at bringing about racial harmony based on equality....and to abandon its policies of apartheid and racial discrimination', and requested the Secretary-General, 'in consultation with the Government of the Union of South Africa, to make such arrangements as would adequately help in upholding the purposes and principles of the Charter and to report to the Security Council whenever necessary and appropriate' (United Nations 1994:244-245).

This was a relatively mild, compromise resolution. The United States Embassy in South Africa reported that it came 'as a relief' to the government there, leaving it 'with the impression that they need not fear any real difficulty from U.N. side and that the old policies could be pursued without serious consequences from abroad' (Hammarskjöld Papers). The representative of the only African country on the Council at the time, Tunisia, said he had expected 'a great deal more', while France and Britain abstained because they thought the resolution went beyond what the Charter permitted. That was also the line taken by the permanent South African representative to the UN, Bernardus (Brand) Fourie, when he addressed the Council, though Fourie also went on to say that if there was any further bloodshed in South Africa, the Security Council would have to accept its share of

responsibility! The American representative, Henry Cabot Lodge, chair of the Council, said that the resolution was designed to build a bridge, not a wall, between the UN and South Africa, while the Soviet representative made it clear that, while he would vote for the resolution, the Soviet Union would have preferred one that did not transfer responsibility from the Council to the Secretary-General and one that would have asked the Secretary-General to observe and report, not consult with the apartheid government. Others who spoke on the resolution, however, said that they trusted the 'political acumen' of the Secretary-General and thought the resolution was admirably non-specific in not laying out the precise steps that the Secretary-General should take (*New York Times* 2 April 1960). Those who were to criticise the vagueness of the resolution were to point out that it did not make clear, for example, whether, if the Secretary-General were to visit South Africa, he would merely speak to the South African government, or whether he should also consult more widely and gather information on the South African situation for the UN (e.g. *Cape Times* 9 January 1961).

Among the key hurdles initially facing Hammarskjöld were whether the South African government would see a visit by him as interference in its domestic affairs, and, if a visit took place, who, besides the government, Hammarskjöld would see. When he met the British Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, in April, a few days after the African National Congress (ANC), along with the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), which had organised the demonstrations on 21 March, had been banned, the two men agreed that 'the necessary change' in South Africa 'can only come from within', and that meant change from within the government, for there was no realistic likelihood of the government being overthrown by internal resistance. After the Sharpeville massacre a number of prominent people, including the Minister of Lands, Paul Sauer, called for a change in racial policy away from a rigid application of apartheid laws. Taking up the idea of exploiting divisions in South Africa's ruling elite, Hammarskjöld suggested to Selwyn Lloyd that 'pressure should be maintained in support of the moderates, but in such a form as not to lead to any international showdown with ensuring entrenchment of the diehards in their positions, before a counter-balancing influence within the Union can have made itself felt' (Hammarskjöld Papers). If the South African government did not allow him to visit – and this was by no means certain; Hungary had refused to allow him to visit after the events of 1956 – he anticipated that his report to the Security Council 'undoubtedly would provoke an immediate Security Council meeting likely to decide at least on withdrawal of [South African] diplomatic representation' (Hammarskjöld Papers). While the African and Asian countries at the UN probably hoped that he would be refused entry, and that such a refusal would help their case for the imposition of economic sanctions by the UN against the apartheid regime, the British government urged the South African government to agree to the visit, and Eric Louw, South Africa's Minister for External Affairs, soon issued a formal invitation to him to visit, with the proviso that such a visit 'did not imply any recognition by the Union government of UN authority in relation to South Africa's domestic affairs' (Hammarskjöld Papers).

While the post-Sharpeville mood probably influenced the decision to allow Hammarskjöld to visit, the South African government of course realised that allowing him to visit would end any possibility of any immediate further action against South Africa by the UN Security Council. In an interim report to the Council on 19 April, Hammarskjöld informed it that he would go to London to meet Louw after the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' conference in May (and he would have met Prime Minister Verwoerd there as well, had he not been recovering from having been shot in the head in an attempted assassination), and that 'It is agreed between the Government of the Union of South Africa and myself that consent of the Union Government to discuss the Security Council's resolution with the Secretary-General would not require prior recognition from the Union Government of the United Nations authority' (United Nations Security Council 1960). The South African government told Hammarskjöld that it would be best to defer his proposed visit until the judicial commissions into the shootings at Sharpeville and Langa on 21 March had submitted their reports, and when he met Louw at South African House in London on 13 and 14 May, the two men agreed that he would visit in July 1960, after which he planned to report back to the Security Council before the annual UN General Assembly session beginning in September. Hammarskjöld reported to Selwyn Lloyd that 'the discussions with Mr. Louw turned out surprisingly well, and

the road is paved to Pretoria, not only through good intentions, but, I hope, also by some solid realisation of the need for substantive progress, be it ever so modest' (Hammar skjöld Papers).

Before he met Louw in London, four leading members of the resistance in South Africa then in London, including Oliver Tambo of the ANC and two representatives of the PAC, asked Hammar skjöld for a meeting. They wanted him to insist that when he visited South Africa he should talk to Chief Albert Luthuli, the President-General of the ANC, and Robert Sobukwe, President of the PAC, though the former was banned and restricted and the latter was in jail (Hammar skjöld Papers). Hammar skjöld did not meet the four, but did ask Louw for 'free access to such non-governmental persons as it might be useful for him to see'. Louw said there would be no strings attached to his visit, but pointed to certain 'risks and possible objections against other contacts', to which Hammar skjöld replied that contacts 'with any specific people or groups would have to be decided upon as the means to an end' and such a decision 'was a question of "wisdom" which it was no use to discuss at the present stage' (Hammar skjöld Papers). When a tentative schedule was then drawn up for the visit, it provided for a ten day visit that took him to Johannesburg for 'discussion with representative Africans' on day four, to Cape Town on day five, where he would have 'discussion with representatives of "Cape Coloureds"', to Umtata and to Durban, where he would have 'discussions with representatives of Africans and Indians' (Hammar skjöld Papers). When Hammar skjöld approved this, 'subject to adjustments which can only be made on the spot' (Hammar skjöld Papers), he did not anticipate that from the beginning of July he would become almost entirely consumed with the Congo issue.

In July 1960, as the date of his visit approached, concerns began to be expressed in South Africa that he should not only talk to the government and those black leaders whom the government might want him to meet. Alan Paton, chairman of the non-racial Liberal Party, issued a statement calling for him to meet people across the political spectrum, and Paton wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt in New York to ask her to use her influence to ensure that this happened (Hammar skjöld Papers). At a meeting in the City Hall in Cape Town a Liberal Party spokesperson claimed that there was 'intense interest' by Africans in the forthcoming visit, and the *Cape Times* stressed the importance of Hammar skjöld getting 'a balanced picture' by meeting other than government people (*Cape Times* 26 July and 2 August 1960). The South African Indian Congress and the Congress of Democrats urged him to meet 'representative leaders', mentioning Luthuli in particular, and Duma Nokwe, Secretary-General of the banned ANC and a lawyer, wrote to Hammar skjöld from Pretoria Central prison, where he was detained, to appeal to him to meet Luthuli (Reddy Papers). Though the PAC leadership within the country was silent on Hammar skjöld's visit, from Windhoek in South West Africa, Uatja Kaukuetu, the acting President-General of the South West Africa National Union (SWANU), which like the PAC had been formed the previous year, asked for an interview with Hammar skjöld, presumably expecting him to visit South West Africa. Kaukuetu claimed that SWANU represented 'by far the greater majority of the total population of the territory' and said that it could explain apartheid and its impact to him. Moreover, his statement continued, such a meeting would enhance the prestige of the UN, for, referring to the Herero petitions, it would 'obviate suspicion on the part of those who have called on the United Nations for the past 13 years' (*Cape Times* 29 July 1960; cf. Sellström 1999:142-143).

But Hammar skjöld was not to visit anywhere in the region in 1960, for from early July the Congo crisis became his chief priority, and it was first announced that his visit to South Africa would be shortened, so that he would only meet the government, then that his visit would be postponed until late August or early September, and then, when he had to return to UN headquarters in New York to report on the Congo, that it would not take place at all at that time (Hammar skjöld Papers). All he could report to the UN Security Council on 11 October was that he had had another meeting with Louw at UN headquarters in New York on 28 September, that Louw had issued a new invitation to him to visit, and that he now planned to undertake the visit in January 1961. His interim report added that 'during the contemplated visit to the Union of South Africa, while consultation throughout would be with the Union Government, no restrictive rules were to be imposed on the Secretary-General' (United Nations Security Council 1960).

This lengthy delay meant that by the time he did visit, the post-Sharpeville crisis in South Africa had abated, the ruling white minority had recovered its confidence – in part thanks to Verwoerd’s ‘miraculous’ recovery – and talk of any relaxation in apartheid had disappeared. Also, the urgency expressed by the African and Asian countries at the UN to tackle the South African conflict had faded. On the other hand, during the intervening months many more independent African countries had become members of the UN, and Hammarskjöld knew that their presence would mean that the campaign against apartheid at the UN was likely to grow more intense in the future. The question in 1960-61 seemed to many to be whether South Africa would follow other African countries and ‘decolonise’ in some form, which would mean abandoning apartheid and perhaps accepting some form of power-sharing, for the idea that the ruling white minority would lose all political power seemed far-fetched to most, though some thought it possible. For South Africa’s ruling white elite, however, their country was quite different from the rest of Africa, and there was no question of them following the route to black majority rule. As we will see, this was the argument that was put forcefully by Verwoerd in his talks with Hammarskjöld.

## The visit

Hammarskjöld’s visit did not begin well. When he disembarked at Leopoldville in the Congo from the Pan American Airlines DC8 that had taken him there from New York, certain ‘important’ documents relating to his visit to South Africa were found to be missing. At Jan Smuts airport outside Johannesburg Pan American staff searched the plane, but did not find the documents, which, it was reported at the time, another passenger had picked up (*New York Times* 6 January 1961). These documents may have included the lengthy briefing papers on South Africa that had been prepared for him at UN headquarters the previous April and May. He had then also read Leo Marquard’s *The peoples and policies of South Africa*, which he called a ‘sober and for that reason all the more appalling analysis of the South African problem’ (Hammarskjöld Papers). Though the problems of the Congo must have remained in his mind throughout his South African visit, Hammarskjöld was clearly well-prepared for his discussions with Verwoerd. His chief African adviser, Heinrich Wieschhoff, an American of German origin, knew South Africa well, having lived in Pretoria before the Second World War, where he had continued his studies at the local university. Wieschhoff accompanied Hammarskjöld throughout his visit and Hammarskjöld relied on him for advice on where to go and what to see.

When Hammarskjöld flew into South Africa, his plane was at the last minute instructed to land at the state airfield at Waterkloof and not at the main commercial airport of Johannesburg, Jan Smuts, where a group of demonstrators had gathered. He was therefore welcomed initially only by some government officials and a few journalists, but by the time he reached his hotel in Pretoria, there were about 300 ‘Africans, Indians, half-castes and a few whites’ there to greet him with the thumbs up sign of the Congress Alliance, formed in the mid-1950s of the main anti-apartheid movements and led by the ANC. They sang the anthem of the ANC, ‘Nkosi sikelel’ iAfrika’, and held up placards that read, inter alia, ‘Welcome to our Police State’, ‘Dag: Take the Yokes off our Neck’, ‘Dag Baas (Good day, Master) – where is your pass?’, ‘Meet Non-white leaders’, ‘Don’t forget Sharpeville’, ‘Dag: visit Pondoland’ and ‘We want Human Rights, Higher Wages’. One of the group tried to present him with a letter asking him to meet recognised leaders and others tried to garland him. While both the letter and the garland had to be left for him at the hotel reception desk (*Cape Times* 7 January 1961; *New York Times* 7 January 1961), there was clearly hope that his visit, watched by the world, would allow at least some space for engagement with the chief official of the world body.

Though Hammarskjöld began his talks with Verwoerd almost immediately after his arrival, he would by then have received an unsigned memorandum submitted to him by the ANC and its associated organisations. This argued that ‘Whereas the unjust nature of South Africa’s form of government was only of academic interest in the past, it is now a source of great concern to many nations throughout the world. This is because South African tension and violence is recognized as a threat to world peace’. The memorandum concluded: ‘Above all, we hope that your investigations here will bear out our repeated contention that the South African Government is a

monster, imposing its arrogant will on a dissenting people. We hope that you will recognize, as we do, that this Government is holding the vast majority of our people down by sheer force, and that its policies are contrary to world practice. We hope, too, that you will inform the Security Council that the majority of the South African people are looking to that body for substantial assistance in their struggles for the realization of true democracy in our country' (Memorandum 1961).

Hammar skjöld's visit was, for the most part, carefully controlled by the government, which of course knew of the appeals for him to meet opposition leaders and knew that he would be seen in some quarters in South Africa as representing hope for change and an end to apartheid. Though certain events were arranged for him in advance, he was able to go where he wished, but a heavy security presence followed him, and for the most part he travelled in government cars. After his initial talks with Verwoerd, he flew to Cape Town for a 'day off' on Sunday 8 January. One of the diplomats in the talks in Pretoria was J.F. (Frikkie) Botha, who had represented South Africa at the UN before Fourie and so had got to know Hammar skjöld in New York. He has also become a close friend of Wieschhoff, to whom he suggested that in Cape Town Hammar skjöld should be the guest of Paul Sauer, who after the Sharpeville massacre had suggested that the apartheid laws relating to urban Africans might have to be reconsidered, and was therefore one of those Afrikaners thought to be 'verlig' (enlightened). Hammar skjöld was taken by car from his hotel in the Gardens to major tourist sites in the city, then to Stellenbosch, Fransch Hoek, where he visited the Huguenot Memorial, and Paarl, where he had a meal at the wine farm of the chairman of the leading wine co-operative in the region. As they looked out over the vineyards, Wieschhoff is said to have remarked to Sauer, with a smile: 'To think that all this must be ruled by the restless natives of the Witwatersrand', and Hammar skjöld to have commented that the Cape was more like Europe than Africa (*Die Burger* 1961; Botha 2011). After his visit to the Congo, it certainly must have appeared that way. The *Cape Times* noted that he visited no Cape Town townships and that the only non-white area he passed through was the Coloured suburb of Athlone (*Cape Times* 9 January 1961).

In the talks in Pretoria (see next section), Verwoerd had tried to justify apartheid by reference to the diverse nature of the South African population, and Hammar skjöld had asked him in particular where those of mixed descent fitted into the apartheid jigsaw (Botha 2011). After his 'day off', he visited the Parliament buildings in Cape Town (Parliament itself was not in session) and the nearby government offices, where he met members of the Council for Coloured Affairs, an unrepresentative state-appointed body. He was greeted by people holding up placards, some welcoming him but others calling the Council members stooges. Reg September of the South African Coloured People's Congress tried to present him with a letter critical of the fact that he was only meeting those the government wanted him to see. That evening he attended a dinner in his honour by the Administrator of Cape Province, Mr F.S. Malan, where the cultural historian I.D. du Plessis, an apartheid apologist who was then Secretary for Coloured Affairs, tried to persuade him that the Coloured people were a distinct group in South African society. He then flew to Umtata, the chief city in the Transkei, which he knew was the area at the forefront of the implementation of the policy of 'Grand Apartheid', and there met state-appointed African chiefs who were members of the Transkeian Territorial Authority, which had been given some powers of local government. These chiefs were headed by Botha Sigcau, who would become the first President of the Transkei when that Bantustan was given its nominal 'independence' by the South African government in October 1976.

That evening Hans Abraham, the Commissioner-General for the Transkei, hosted a dinner for Hammar skjöld, and in his welcoming speech chose to follow the line taken by many National Party politicians and launched into a scathing attack on the UN, where he said South Africa had been given a rough passage. An annoyed Hammar skjöld slipped a note to Brand Fourie saying, 'How long must I endure this, or shall I walk out?' (Fourie 1991:45). He decided to stay and in his speech spoke of the UN as a mirror of the world where global concerns were reflected, but he was also reported to have said: 'I admire the spirit in which you do your utmost to help your friends [i.e. the Africans] to achieve the goal which you have set yourselves'. This remark led three leaders of the Liberal Party – Alan Paton, Jordan Ngubane and Peter Brown – to fire off a telegram to him, expressing their 'great concern', for they said that such a remark would be taken by many South Africans as approving

apartheid, and especially the Bantustan dream of Verwoerd. ‘The hopes of millions of South Africans whose representatives you have not yet met lie in your visit’, Paton told him (Urquhart 1973:499), and the chair of the Pretoria branch of the Liberal Party claimed that the trust of blacks in the UN had been severely shaken by his comment. Hammarskjöld’s staff had then to issue a statement saying he had been misquoted and his speech taken out of context, for, they said, as Secretary-General he could make no public pronouncements on South African government policies (Contact 1961; *Cape Times* 12 January 1961).

Hammarskjöld asked to be driven from Umtata into nearby Pondoland, where an uprising the previous year against the imposition of Bantustan policies had left over twenty dead. He drove to Lusikisiki in a car with Kaiser Matanzima, who would become Transkei’s first Prime Minister twenty-five years later, but probably saw no signs of the revolt, which had taken place in mountainous country (*New York Times* 10 January 1961). From Umtata, he flew back to the Witwatersrand, by which time the repeated criticism that he was not meeting any real leaders of the African people could be ignored no longer. But there were problems. Luthuli was restricted to his home town of Groutville in Natal Province and it was not practical for Hammarskjöld to go there (on his visit in June 1966, Robert Kennedy had the use of a helicopter to take him from Durban to see Luthuli), and when Hammarskjöld told Verwoerd on 10 January that he wanted to ‘meet true representatives of natives and coloured’, Verwoerd replied, ‘These people will interpret such interviews as an arbitration by you on UN instructions, as an appeal by them to higher authority’, adding, ‘We do not ...wish you to see representatives of illegal organisations or people under ban for political reasons’ (Hammarskjöld Papers).

Clearly Hammarskjöld thought he could not insist on meeting such people, and only on his last full day in South Africa did he finally meet three leading Africans who had some association with the ANC but were not banned or restricted: K.T. Masemola, the Secretary of the Pretoria Native Advisory Board and a director of companies, William Nkomo, a medical doctor who had been a founder member of the ANC Youth League but was in 1961 distancing himself from his activist past, and Alfred B Xuma, who as President-General of the ANC had been part of a successful campaign at the UN in 1946 to block a proposed South African annexation of South West Africa, but who had then been ousted as President-General by the Youth League in 1949 and by 1961 was very much a ‘has-been’. The three were hardly, then, the representative leaders that so many had called on Hammarskjöld to meet. But in a meeting that lasted 90 minutes, the three Africans did tell him that leaders like Luthuli should share in the running of the country; that they rejected the division of the country by the creation of Bantustans; and that ‘there might be a case for outside intervention if South Africa continued to deny human rights to Africans and other non-whites’ (*The Star* 1961; *New York Times* 14 January 1961).

After this meeting Hammarskjöld at last saw a number of African townships. He was first driven to Alexandria township, then south to Meadowlands in Soweto. Though the convoy in which he travelled mostly sped through the various townships in a cloud of dust, he asked to meet some of the inhabitants, and visited five homes in Soweto of people who had been forcibly removed some years previously from Sophiatown. He was ringed by police as he did so, however, and journalists and press photographers were bitter that they could not get near him. When he then visited a gold mine he chose not to go down the mine shaft but instead to meet two Africans in the mine office, with only Wieschhoff and his personal bodyguard, William Ranallo, present. Ephraim Letsoara, the head African clerk, and Cornelius Motyeku told reporters afterwards that he had asked them if they ever saw political leaders, to which they replied that that was not allowed. They also told him that they were well treated, but had to carry passes. Before leaving South Africa, he visited another township outside Pretoria, where he went into a beerhall and talked to Africans in a butchery, a dry cleaning shop and a general store. He had planned to stay two more days, but had to return to New York for another Security Council debate on the Congo (*Cape Times* 13 January 1961; Urquhart 1973:499).

## The talks

Hammar skjöld interpreted his mandate from the UN as not merely to talk about the situation that had given rise to the shootings at Sharpeville and Langa, but about apartheid in general. This he approached mostly from a general philosophical angle and hardly at all in terms of what it meant for blacks on a day-to-day basis. In his talks with Louw in May 1960 he had first sketched his views on South Africa's racial policy. He told Louw that he recognised that though 'both total integration and total and equitable separation may not be objectionable policies from the standpoint of human rights, he doubted that, having regard to the economical and demographical situation in the Union, policies of complete separation could be regarded as realistic', and he pointed out that even in what were called 'European areas' there would always be a 'non-European majority which...would wish to play a full part in Union's affairs'. Louw made the absurd claim that South Africa's racial policy 'had been shaped in the best interest of the African people', but did concede that 'a new approach would have to be taken in respect of the...Coloured population'. Hammar skjöld ended his discussions with Louw by asking three questions: 'in the so-called Bantu homelands would the people constitutionally be kept to traditional lines or be permitted to take up 20<sup>th</sup> century constitutional forms with a natural share in the responsibility for their country?'; 'how could economic equity be created in view of the exorbitant investments necessary?'; and 'could it be envisaged that the native group in the white regions could be barred from rights given to the white population?' (Hammar skjöld Papers).

Though Hammar skjöld told the Security Council in October 1960 that he intended to 'explore with the Prime Minister the possibility of arrangements which would provide for appropriate safeguards of human rights, with adequate contact with the United Nations' (United Nations Security Council 1960), the country's largest newspaper, the *Sunday Times*, pointed out during his visit that Verwoerd had in a sense given his response to Hammar skjöld even before he arrived. In his New Year's broadcast the Prime Minister had said that the UN had become 'a platform where problems are created and aggravated' and that he could not believe that any 'world organisation...can make any impression on our South African thinking or action', while in another speech he had said that, in response to pressure from overseas, South Africa would have to be 'as unyielding as walls of granite' (Uys 1961). When the two men did finally meet, Verwoerd, who could be charming (Kenney 1980), seems to have liked the reserved quiet manner of Hammar skjöld, so different from what he saw as the pompous and arrogant attitude shown by his visitor of a year earlier, the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. In a break in the talks, Verwoerd said in Afrikaans to Frikkie Botha and the few other South Africans present, in language similar to that Mrs Thatcher was to use of Gorbachev, that Hammar skjöld was a person he could engage with (Botha 2011).

When his discussions with Verwoerd began at the Prime Minister's official residence in Pretoria on 6 January 1961, Hammar skjöld was told that South Africa was very different from the rest of Africa and that 'the Western Powers should understand what the Union means for the protection of Africa from communism and thus for the safety of Europe'. Integration would mean 'national suicide', said Verwoerd, while separation was 'a good neighbour policy' and the ultimate goal was 'a commonwealth of South Africa, including white and black states'. In response, Hammar skjöld made the point that 'the natives have no saying [sic] in the central Government and its preparation for the future'. While most of the UN would support 'speedy integration', he personally was not in favour of that, and he realised that it was politically unrealistic, so the question was whether there was 'a competitive alternative' to integration. In further discussions, in another five meetings, Hammar skjöld and Verwoerd explored the practicalities of the 'Bantu homelands', with Hammar skjöld pointing out that they would require major investment and much more land to become viable, and he failed to see the likelihood of that. He told Verwoerd that he did not understand South Africa's racial policy outside the 'homelands', and that much of the country's legislation left him 'frankly shocked'. Racial discrimination 'is bound to cast doubt of [sic] the so-to-say rational arguments for segregation'. He pointed out that South Africa had not explained its approach to the world 'in terms which convinced public opinion', and that the present slow



progress to the government's self-imposed targets would not work. The African states at the UN would unite on the South African issue. A much bolder approach might 'catch the wind' (did he think here of Macmillan's 'wind of change'?), but was urgent. It would mean setting aside 'a sufficient and coherent territory to serve as a basis for the national life of a Bantu state', and 'fixed steps at short intervals leading to the establishment of such political institutions as were necessary as a basis for full independence and self-government'. Africans outside the 'homelands' must have their 'human rights' recognised. He suggested that it might be useful for the government to set up an institution to receive complaints and draw attention to deviations from the sound way to reach the target, as well as to maintain contact with the UN. In response Verwoerd said that his government would 'try to increase the pace but it is very difficult'; 'in the meantime we have to maintain the political control in our own hands. Otherwise the natives, with the help of international force, will overwhelm us' (Hammar skjöld Papers).

Though the status of South West Africa did come up (Botha 2011), Hammar skjöld had no mandate to raise that issue, and it was not pursued. At the heart of the discussions, then, was Verwoerd's concept of so-called 'grand apartheid' (to distinguish it from the 'petty apartheid' of racial discrimination similar to that of the United States South earlier in the century) or 'separate development', which, as he had explained to Macmillan a year earlier, was his answer to the African nationalism then sweeping the continent. As we have seen, Hammar skjöld did not reject out of hand the idea of developing the African reserve areas into self-governing and then 'independent' territories, but he explored with Verwoerd what might be done to make this meaningful, and insisted that any such policy should be discussed with those it affected. He knew, of course, that Verwoerd had made clear there would be no change to apartheid per se, and he tried to raise issues of human rights, which Verwoerd deflected by discussions of South Africa's historical legacy and its diverse population, which he said required policies of separation. Though there was no agreement between the two men, Hammar skjöld did not see this as meaning the engagement could not continue, and both men envisaged that their exchanges would continue at some future date. So Hammar skjöld reported to the Security Council on 23 January 1961 that while 'so far no mutually acceptable arrangement has been found', 'this lack of agreement is not conclusive' and that the 'exchange of views in general has served a most useful purpose. The Secretary-General does not consider the consultations as having come to an end, and he looks forward to their continuation at an appropriate time with a view to further efforts from his side to find an adequate solution....The Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa has indicated that further consideration will be given to questions raised in the course of the talks and has stated that "the Union Government, having found the talks with the Secretary-General useful and constructive, have decided to invite him at an appropriate time, or times, to visit the Union again in order that the present contact may be continued"' (United Nations Security Council 1961:S/4635).

## Assessment

Soon after Hammar skjöld's visit relations between the South African government and the UN deteriorated again when the UN's commission on South Africa threatened to visit without visas, but when Hammar skjöld died in September most commentators in South Africa praised him for his quiet diplomacy and integrity. For Hammar skjöld the visit to South Africa, for all its difficulties, must have been a relatively pleasant distraction from the Congo, where he was involved in what he himself called 'the craziest operation in history' (Henderson 1969:80). There were numerous demands on him on what was a very short visit, some of them absurd. The South African Tennis Board, for example, wanted him to investigate colour discrimination in sport (*Cape Times* 9 January 1961). His main task was to talk to a government pursuing policies with which he fundamentally disagreed, but, as we have seen, he made some efforts to speak to others. The delay of over six months for his arrival was, from the point of view of any action being taken against the apartheid regime, unfortunate, though by the time it did take place another seventeen African countries had joined the UN and they would add voice to the campaign against apartheid. Hammar skjöld's initiative was not continued, for the next Secretary-General to visit was Pérez de Cuéllar in 1982, and his visit was mainly focused on the South West Africa/Namibia issue.

Could Hammarskjöld have done more? He was in South Africa as a guest of the South African government and he knew he had to be seen as an impartial UN person. The arrangements for his visit, as the *Cape Times* said, were ‘calculated to frustrate those who had planned demonstrations and hoped for meetings to show him another sides of the picture’ (*Cape Times* 12 January 1961), but as the newspaper pointed out, he could have stayed in his hotel room and chose not to. The *Cape Times* believed that the government had received bad publicity from the impression that was created that it was protecting him from anti-government influences. It would have been better, the *Cape Times* suggested, had the government made clear to the public at the beginning of his visit that he was free to see anyone he wanted to see (*Cape Times*, editorial, 13 January 1961).

Had Hammarskjöld lived and made further visits, it seems unlikely that he could either have become a strong voice against apartheid or have persuaded Verwoerd to modify his Bantustan policies. At the first press conference he had held after the Security Council resolution of April 1960, Hammarskjöld had asked: ‘How do you go about building bridges? The building of a firm bridge, of course, over which you can pass without any difficulties, may be a long story, but you can at least put the first stones down into the water or get a first piece of wood across the water, a little bit out into it’ (Hammarskjöldblog.com). The South African government expected him to return and wanted to continue the dialogue with him, but in the event his visit led nowhere and the impetus for further action in the Security Council was lost. But Peter Brown, the National Chairman of the Liberal Party, though disappointed in his visit, thought that it might have positive results. If Verwoerd was deaf to Hammarskjöld’s arguments, wrote Brown, ‘the United Nations and the Commonwealth will know that argument is useless and will think more in terms of action ... it would be idle to suppose that the rest of the world will sit back and let apartheid flourish [or] that any state can survive in isolation in the Atomic Age’ (Brown 1961). And Hammarskjöld’s failure to achieve anything substantial in his talks with Verwoerd did feed into South Africa’s withdrawal from the Commonwealth two months after his visit. After the Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ conference the previous year Kwame Nkrumah had told a branch of the UN Organisation that ‘If the Secretary-General is unable to agree with the Government of the Union of South Africa on such arrangements as would adequately help in upholding the purposes and principles of the Charter, then the Government of Ghana for one would find it embarrassing to remain in the Commonwealth with a republic whose policy is not based upon the purposes and principles of the United Nations’ (Hammarskjöld Papers).

Though Hammarskjöld’s successors were to take up the South West Africa/Namibia issue, and the Security Council was to impose a voluntary arms embargo in 1963 and then a mandatory embargo in 1977, the UN was never to impose economic sanctions on South Africa. On the other hand, the mounting campaign against South Africa at the UN was one aspect of the growing international pressure against apartheid that finally helped bring that racial system to an end. Hammarskjöld’s interaction with South Africa was a brief moment in a much longer story (Reddy 2008). It is certainly the case that on South Africa and South West Africa he achieved nothing significant, for apartheid intensified and repression and conflict in both countries grew worse. There was none of the ‘substantial progress’ he had hoped for, however modest. Anti-apartheid activists were naturally disappointed in this, but in the context of the time it may be argued that it was not possible for him to have done more than he did.

## Sources

Botha, J.F. (Frikkie), interview with the author, 12 April 2011.

Brown, Peter 1961. In terms of action. *Contact*, 28 January.

*Cape Times*. Press cuttings 1960-61.

Contact 1961. Hans Abraham provoked Dag at Umtata dinner. *Contact*, 28 January.

De Cuéllar, Javier Pérez 1997. *Pilgrimage for peace. A Secretary-General’s memoir*. New York, St. Martin’s Press.

- Die Burger 1961. Spel Dag se dood onheil vir ons? (Will Dag's death be misfortune for us?). *Die Burger*, 23 September.
- Du Pisani, André 1985. *SWA/Namibia: The politics of continuity and change*. Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball.
- Fourie, Brand 1991. *Brandpunte: Agter die skerms met Suid-Afrika se bekendste diplomat* (Burning points: Behind the scenes with South Africa's most well known diplomat). Cape Town, Tafelberg.
- Hammar skjöldblog.com. Available from: <[www.dag-hammar skjöld.com/](http://www.dag-hammar skjöld.com/)>
- Hammar skjöld Papers. The National Library of Sweden, Stockholm, box L, files 179-191.
- Henderson, James L. 1969. *Hammar skjöld*. London, Methuen Educational.
- Irwin, Ryan 2010. Apartheid on trial: South West Africa and the International Court of Justice, 1960–66. *The International History Review*, 32 (4) (December 2010), pp. 619–642.
- Kenney, Henry 1980. *Architect of apartheid: H.F. Verwoerd: An appraisal*. Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball.
- Memorandum 1961. Submitted to the United Nations Secretary-General, Dag Hammar skjöld, 6 January. Available from: <<http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=4755&t=United%20Nations>>
- New York Times*, Press cuttings 1960-61.
- Reddy Papers. E.S. Reddy Collection, Yale University Library, MS 1499, box 57: folder Wieschhoff.
- Reddy, E.S. 2008. The United Nations and the struggle for liberation in South Africa. In: South African Democracy Education Trust, *The road to democracy in South Africa*, volume 3: International Solidarity, part 1, chapter 2, pp.41-139.
- Saunders, Chris 2007. Michael Scott and Namibia. *African Historical Review*, 39 (2), pp. 25-40.
- Sellström, Tor 1999. *Sweden and national liberation in Southern Africa*, volume 1. Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet
- The Star 1961. Natives told Dag re 'Outside Interference'. *The Star*, 13 January.
- United Nations [1945]. *Charter of the United Nations*. New York, United Nations.
- United Nations 1994. *The United Nations and Apartheid 1948-1994*. New York, United Nations.
- United Nations Security Council 1960. Second Interim Report by the Secretary-General under Security Council Resolution S/4300, 11 October.
- United Nations Security Council 1961. S/4635: Report by the Secretary-General under Security Council Resolution S/4300, 23 January
- Urquhart, B. 1973. *Hammar skjöld*. London, Bodley Head
- Uys, Stanley 1961. Granite face of apartheid. *Sunday Times*, 8 January.