

Peter Hawthorne

Tales From the Border

A local journalist alerts the world to the Angolan war's spread to Namibia

THE LANGUAGE IS GERMAN, AND THE SAFARI SUITS ARE tailored in Frankfurt, Munich and Berlin. In the international arrivals hall at Hosea Kutako Airport the decor is colorful, exact and metallic, the floor so polished you could eat your *bockwurst* off it. With its quaint echoes of the old German empire in Africa, Namibia is a home away from home for visitors from the *Vaterland*. But the domestic peace and the flow of foreign tourists have been rudely interrupted: Namibia is reeling from the fallout of a bloody civil war on its border.

There is little about the capital to suggest that the tranquility of this southwest African state is at all under threat. Windhoek is a sleepy, thirsty town, parched by the dusty winds that blow in from the Namib Desert. Shoppers throng Independence Avenue, once called Kaiserstrasse, drink strong coffee with *Apfelstrudel* in pavement cafés or quaff steins of rich, dark German-style ale in leafy beer gardens.

But headlines in the *Windhoek Observer* make for sober reading: "A new war," "A campaign of terror," "Our young men are getting killed." It may be happening 1,000 km northeast of Windhoek, but, says Hannes Smith of the *Observer*, it is still war, it is on Namibia's doorstep and, he claims, the government is reluctant to admit it.

Smith is part owner and editor of the paper but prefers to call himself "reporter-in-chief." For nearly 40 years he has reported events in Namibia with an eccentric flair that has made him something of a legend. In a writing style rich in hyperbole "Smithie," as he is better known, regales his readers with a steady diet of scoops and scandal.

During the years that South Africa administered Namibia—then known as South West Africa—Smithie railed against apartheid, corruption and attacks on the freedom of the press. His paper was once banned by the South Africans for publishing topless pinups, now a standard feature. He has been sued, cursed and threatened more times than he cares to remember. When Namibia threw off the South African yoke in 1990, Smithie lost none of his fire. In 1998 he was jailed for a week for contempt of court and he still has a libel suit from a government official pending against him.

In December last year Smithie packed some *padkos*—food for the road—climbed into his sand-blasted red sedan and drove to the northeast Namibia boundary with Angola where, to the consternation of the Namibian government, he began to report lurid details of the deadly 25-year-old war between the once Moscow-backed Angolan government and

the rebel movement, UNITA, that has now spilled over into Namibia. It is a problem the leaders of the Namibia government would have liked to handle well away from the public eye. But they reckoned without Hannes Smith.

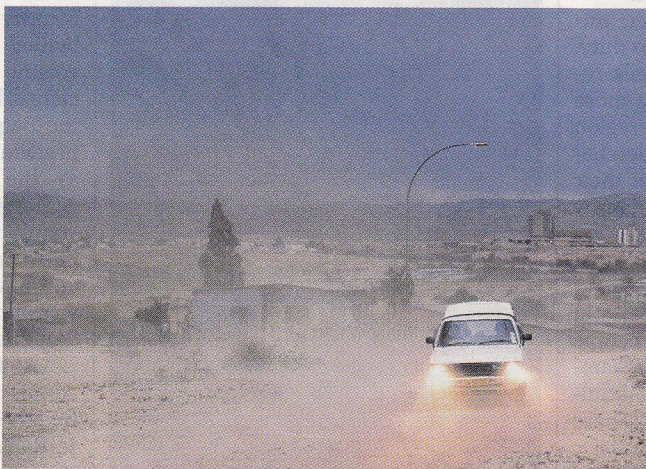
Smithie—already labeled a fifth columnist by government figures—was one of the first local journalists on the scene early in January when three French children were killed and their parents injured by gunfire on the Trans-Caprivi border highway in the northeast. The Namibian government said the killers were UNITA bandits, while UNITA said they were Angolan army soldiers who are working with the Namibian Defense Force to clear the area of rebels.

Whoever is to blame, innocent people living in the Kavango River region are tribally related on both sides of the border, speak the same language, and are now caught up in the crossfire of the Angolan government's offensive, with Namibian support, against UNITA. There have been reports that Namibian and Angolan soldiers are killing and torturing civilians accused of collaboration with UNITA.

The result has been a disastrous paralysis of a part of Namibia that until last year had the potential of becoming a jewel of tourism. Game lodges in the luxuriant, wildlife-rich green belt along the eastern border, some still under construction, are being abandoned. More seriously for the tourist industry, international tour operators, especially in the area north of Windhoek, are getting widespread cancellations as news of the

conflict seeps out. "The sun goes down early in that place," says Smithie. "Then nothing moves. No traffic. No people. Only the military." Maria Dickman, who owns a guest farm some 600 km from the trouble zone, is getting cancellations from regular clients. "We were beginning to get more clients from the United States and Europe," she says. "Now we are hurting."

Smithie continues to rage against the government's lack of candor regarding what is going on in the border area. He says that some of the actions of Namibia's paramilitary Special Field Force smack of "ethnic cleansing" of civilians who are politically opposed to the government. A typical *Observer* editorial warned last week that the government could only come up with "pitiful prattle" while "increasingly we see the specter of anarchy in the region, of total collapse of development, the uprooting of several thousand more people." At 67, Smithie is as energetic as he is eccentric. Even if the border conflict can be contained, Namibians can be sure he will stay on the warpath. ■



ORGE ELIASON—LINK

Though 1,000 km away, Windhoek feels the impact of the war