

London
16th September 1974
Colin O'Brien Winter,
Bishop of Damaraland - in - Exile

Statement of Saint Mary's Hospital, Odibo, Ovamboland, Namibia

The announcement last week by the Administration of South West Africa that it was withdrawing the subsidy paid to St Mary's Hospital, Odibo, Ovamboland, in Namibia, thereby forcing it to close, is yet another example of the arrogant indifference of the white representatives of the South African regime towards the oppressed people of Namibia.

St Mary's Hospital, situated on the border of Namibia and Angola, has been run by the Anglican Church since its founding nearly fifty years ago at a time when the South African authorities had made no provision for medical facilities in Ovamboland, the northern sector of Namibia.

The reason given by the South West African Administration for the subsidy withdrawal was 'lack of financial control'; this statement must be scrutinised further. The main complaint of the Administration is the alleged spending of money on projects unauthorised by the Administration. One of these complaints relates to the purchase of a three-phase electricity generator to ensure an adequate supply of electricity at the hospital. The Matron-in-Charge of the Hospital applied for permission to purchase the generator, was sent the money by the Administration, and so purchased the equipment. However, the formal authority of the Administration was never forthcoming and the Administration, having already sent the money, then asked for it back after the generator had already been purchased and installed.

A second dispute dates back to 1969 when the airfare of a secretary/treasurer from England was paid for out of hospital funds. However, before the secretary/treasurer could assume his duties, his permit to remain in Ovamboland was withdrawn by the Administration without giving any reasons. The Administration then declared that the airfare was an unallowable expense as the secretary/treasurer had never assumed his duties; repayment was demanded by the Administration. There is yet another dispute concerning the airfare of another member of staff.

It must be further pointed out that the accounts of the hospital have been audited annually by auditors appointed by the Administration.

Questions must be raised regarding the attitude of the South West African Administration towards the medical work of the Anglican Church in northern Namibia. In 1968, the hospital was refused permission to provide training for nurses beyond the position of ward orderly, despite the fact that it is the only hospital in the area which could train nurses through the media

of English. This forced Ovambo women who had been educated in English to train as nurses through the medium of Afrikaans, a language which is both unfamiliar and disliked. In 1969, two secretary/treasurers were expelled from Ovamboland within weeks of arriving to assume their duties. It was also in 1969 that rumours were heard that the hospital was to be closed.

At the end of 1972, two Dutch doctors were refused permits to enter Ovamboland to work at the hospital, and a British doctor waited in vain for twelve months for his application for a permit to be answered. The lack of a doctor at the hospital for the past few years has meant that emergency cases have had to be rushed a distance of sixty miles by Landrover to the government hospital.

Thus, it can be seen that the decision closing St Mary's Hospital is the culmination of an extended period of harassment and obstruction of the medical outreach of the church by the government. It is also decision taken with complete disregard for the wishes and needs of the Ovambo people themselves, hundreds of whom have, in the last few months, fled from the terrors of South African rule and sought sanctuary in Angola and Zambia.

Colin Winter