

Series 9: Newsletter Editor's
Files, 1984-1995

Metroland Article on
Southern Africa, 1992

The bride wore white. The groom, in an elegant black tuxedo, was well-dressed too. And the sun reflected brightly off the bridesmaids' purple satin dresses.

For Vera Michelson and Eileen C. Kawola, it was a joyous, if incongruous, moment during a remarkable July fact-finding trip to southern Africa. During their monthlong visit, the two activists from the Capital District Coalition Against Apartheid and Racism traveled to Mozambique, South Africa and Namibia. They visited squatter camps and tribal homelands, saw elegant cities hard by grinding poverty. They caught up with old friends who had spent years in exile and welcomed political prisoners who had just been released from jail.

But for all that, there was something special about the invitation to join a wedding party in Ovamboland, an eight-hour drive north from Windhoek, Namibia's capital city. The groom was a cousin of Helmut Angula, Namibia's Minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources. Like many other southern Africans Michelson and Kawola visited, Angula was an old friend. While an exiled official of the South West Africa People's Organization, he came to Albany to rally support for his nation's independence fight against South Africa's apartheid government.

"It's a great honor to be invited to an African family's wedding," says Prexy Nesbitt, founder and executive director of the Mozambique Solidarity Office. Nesbitt, an African-American who lives in Chicago, helped organize the trip and traveled with Michelson and Kawola in Mozambique and Namibia. Nesbitt was making his 37th visit to the region.

"One of the exciting things to me was to watch the kind of international link that exists because people in Albany showed hospitality and support to people from Namibia and South Africa for so many years," Nesbitt says, "and to see the joy with which people received Vera and Eileen." Namibia, where the activists spent seven days, is on Africa's west coast between South Africa and Angola. It was a South African colony until 1989.

"The wedding was a combination of customs," Michelson recalls. The bride and groom dressed in their best Western, but many of the guests wore traditional clothes. It was a Christian ceremony, performed outside a small church. Afterward, women in traditional dress led the procession across the dry, Namibian desert to the bride's *kraal*, the enclosed family compound typical of rural southern Africa. There the couple received gifts and congratulations before setting off on a 10-mile journey to the groom's home, which, in accordance with tradition, the bride had never seen.

On their long drive across the dry landscape, which is currently facing the worst drought in years, Michelson and Kawola saw the efforts Namibians must make to survive. "We saw water holes that are drying up, and we saw people walking for miles looking for water and tending cattle," Michelson says. "We sometimes saw people having to get water from the same water hole the cattle were drinking from."

Back in Windhoek, which has the flavor and style of a modern European city, the activists visited Katatura, a black township on the outskirts of town. "It was as oppressive as any township or squatter camp we saw in South Africa," Kawola recalls.

"After two years of independence, why does this still exist?" Michelson asks rhetorically.

National elections were held in 1990, she explains, with SWAPO the winner. But the towns have yet to hold local elections. So, much of country is still under the control of the same government and civil service that



Boys recently freed from forced military service.



(l.r) Eileen Kawola and Vera Michelson, back from Africa.

INTO AFRICA

Two Capital Region activists report on the continuing struggle against apartheid

By Jeff Jones

ruled during colonial days. As part of the United Nations-negotiated agreement that led to South Africa's withdrawal from Namibia, the country's whites will retain their government jobs for life. And South Africa still controls Walvis Bay, the country's main South Atlantic port.

So SWAPO looks to the future. "They are focused on educating the young people to expect their new constitutional rights," Michelson says. The youth will have learned to claim all the rights their parents fought for.

The travelers began their African sojourn July 2 in Johannesburg, South Africa's largest city, but left almost immediately for Mozambique. "Enjoy your visit, or whatever you're doing," the pilot said ominously as the commercial airliner descended to land at the airport in Mozambique's capital, Maputo. The country, which won its

independence 17 years ago, has been devastated by war and internal political conflict.

Like Nicaragua's Sandinistas, whose dreams for independence were crushed by war with the U.S.-backed contras, the Mozambique Liberation Front, known as FRELIMO, had to defer its vision while it fought a civil war against South African-backed rebels. In 1975, along with Angola and Guinea Bissau, Mozambique won its freedom from Portugal. In the early years after independence, FRELIMO, left with a bankrupt government by the fleeing Portuguese, set out to bring education to a population that was 93 percent illiterate. The country's 1,300 public schools soon grew to some 7,600.

"Mozambique had this wonderful socialist dream," says Kawola, "which got crushed by the South Africans and anyone in the world community who didn't want to

see it exist."

Today, after a decade of civil war with a South Africa-backed group called the Mozambique Resistance Movement (RENAMO), there are fewer than 600 schools left. The country, like Somalia and Namibia, is gripped by the worst drought of the century. Without help, millions more lives will be lost.

"The drought in Somalia and Mozambique is not the result of God, African personality traits or accident," says Nesbitt. "It's the product of specific policies and practices that have left Africa unable to cope. The Mozambican drought and famine would be manageable if not for the war with South Africa."

Mozambique was once one of the most productive agricultural regions in all of central and southern Africa. Now it's not only the poorest, but the most foreign-aid-dependent country in the world. It is deep

in debt to the United States, Italy, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. "One of the things we are pressing for now is forgiveness of debts," says Nesbitt. "Mozambique will be paying until 2085 on just the interest of its World Bank loans."

Author Joseph Hanlon, in *Mozambique: Who Calls the Shots?*, his landmark study of foreign aid, says that the West's largess has been used to "subjugate Mozambique to its pre-1975 status." Donors insist on setting up their own channels for administering the aid, circumventing existing government structures, "thereby lowering the confidence, responsibility and sovereignty of the Mozambican government."

"What struck me in Maputo," recalls Kawola, "is that two blocks away from downtown, you see a squatters' settlement being set up. There are people all over selling whatever they can to get some money; charcoal, a couple of oranges." Meanwhile, the country's former exploiters are coming back. For example, in Maputo, FRELIMO had to sell its future party headquarters, a former hotel, to South African businessmen. And most of the waterfront property along the city's Indian Ocean coastline has been bought by South Africans or Portuguese.

"Now the people who destroyed it are back reaping the benefits," says Kawola.

Our most chilling memory, the one that will never go away," says Kawola, came the afternoon the three activists met with six ragged teenage boys who had been forced to serve with RENAMO, the Mozambique Resistance Movement. "The atrocities these children had seen or even committed were told in their eyes—eyes so sad or devoid of feeling."

RENAMO was created by the Rhodesian intelligence agency to patrol and harass Mozambique's borders when Rhodesia's white government was trying to defeat its own liberation movement. Rhodesia failed, and today the country is called Zimbabwe. But the South African Defense Force took over RENAMO, with the goal of using it to destroy independent Mozambique.

The organization became a darling of right-wingers in the United States, too, who saw it as a vehicle to disrupt another socialist experiment. In that, it has succeeded. But RENAMO has fought one of the most violent wars in modern history, killing and torturing more than a million of its fellow citizens. Nesbitt calls it "a war of mutilation." Teachers and rural medical workers are favorite targets.

RENAMO also has become known for taking young boys, like the six who spoke with Kawola and had been recaptured by the Mozambican military, and forcing them into service. Sometimes, the boys are made to commit an atrocity against their family or village to ensure that their home ties will be severed.

"We asked them what they would like to do now," Kawola says. "They answered that they would like to go to school and be reunited with their families." But one of the boys isn't welcome at home. He had been forced to tell RENAMO where his mother was hiding. They found her and she was abducted. She survived, but is afraid that if her son comes home, she will be kidnapped again. Another of the boys explained that he had once killed someone with a machete.

"I wanted to ask hard questions about how they felt," says Kawola. But they looked so wounded, she didn't have the heart. "I never asked, did you do something to your family?"

But Kawola did ask if they were ever afraid. Zamito, one of the boys, answered that he had been "immunized" against fear. "He told us that the boys would take razor blades, slice a cut in their legs, and put some kind of powder they were given

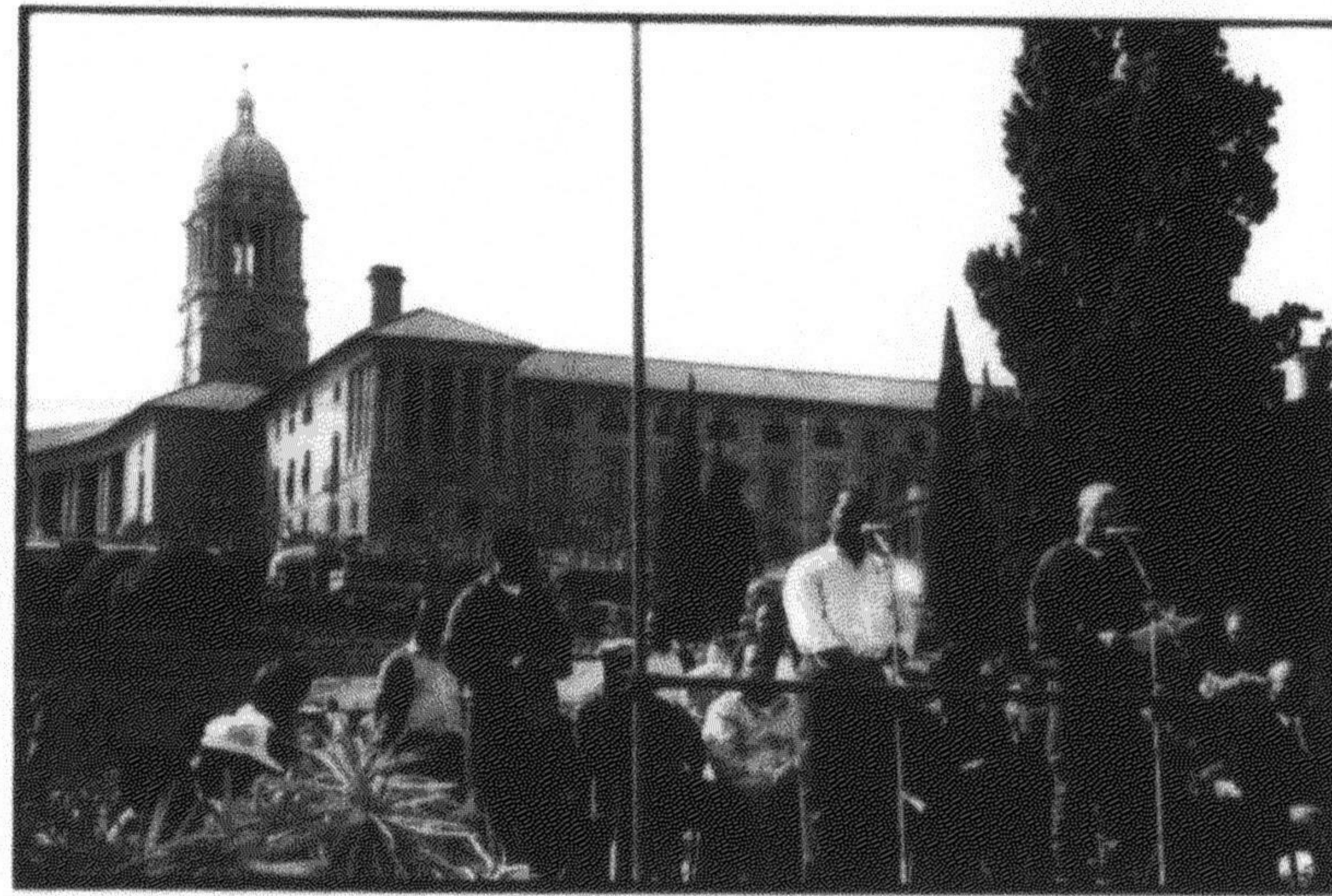
into the open wound. When the sore healed over, they would prick the scar with a pin whenever they felt fear—or hunger or cold—and those feelings would go away." Zamito couldn't say what type of powder, or drug, it was.

"Those kids, who should be going to school and playing with their friends, were learning how to terrorize and kill," says Kawola, an Albany public school teacher. The boys have been reclaimed, she says, "but their childhoods are long gone."

Other Mozambican children have been

jailed with Mandela. Their son, a journalist, arrived shortly thereafter, coming from yet another funeral. Much of the killing in recent years is due to fighting between ANC supporters and Zulus loyal to Chief Mangosuthu Gatscha Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom Party.

Kawola stayed in a middle-class Soweto house—it had electricity and a bathroom—with the family of Yolande Chirwa, a student who attends Hamilton College in upstate New York. Chirwa often spends her weekends in Albany, staying with



ANC leader Nelson Mandela (right) speaks at an anti-apartheid protest in South Africa.

relatively fortunate. On a visit to the Ricatla region outside Maputo, Michelson and Kawola visited the Mocatina Primary School, where some 600 children, about 200 of them orphans, are taught by nine teachers earning the equivalent of \$25 a month. It's a school without walls, since RENAMO would destroy it. The Capital District Coalition Against Apartheid and Racism plans to begin a fund-raising project for the school.

Nesbitt, back in Chicago, reflected on the recent U.N. decision to consider war-crimes trials for those who commit atrocities in the name of "ethnic cleansing" in the former Yugoslavia. "Why can't they put on trial those who have been responsible for the killing of over 1 million people in Mozambique?" he asked bitterly. "Kill a bunch of white folks in Europe, it's like playing with fire. Kill some black folks in Africa, it's like swatting flies."

After five days in Mozambique, Michelson, Kawola and Nesbitt flew back to South Africa. "I just sat on the plane and quietly cried," says Kawola. "And we certainly did not see the worst of Mozambique."

Over the years, Soweto, the community of 3 million black South Africans near Johannesburg, has become synonymous with apartheid.

"There's a clear division," says Kawola. "Johannesburg is such a big, industrial city. And then you drive 10 miles, and you see a green highway sign that says Soweto, and the grass is all gone. It's dirt all over."

During a tour of the township, the women saw two funeral processions within a half-hour. Even though the South African government has legalized the African National Congress and released the organization's president, Nelson Mandela, from jail, violence is still a fact of life in the country's black townships, squatter camps and workers' hostels. Townships like Soweto were created to be reservoirs of cheap black labor to serve the white cities.

Then Michelson and Kawola went to visit Albertina "Mama" Sisulu, a heroic figure in the anti-apartheid struggle and the wife of Walter Sisulu, an ANC leader who was

Kawola or other coalition members.

Later, in Cape Town, Michelson and Kawola stayed with the families of two students who had lived with them in Albany while the ANC was still a banned political organization. Today, Sean Lewis is getting his doctorate at the University of Pittsburgh in applied linguistics, and Shobhna Gopal is a research biologist at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City. But in 1989, this writer was asked not to publish the students' names in a *METROLAND* article, for fear of retaliation against their families.

In Cape Town, Michelson and Kawola participated in an ANC "human chain" demonstration. Thousands of activists held hands and surrounded the downtown business district. It was a prelude to a planned stay-away, an ANC show of strength, that took place in August, shortly after the women returned to Albany: More than 4 million black and white South Africans stayed away from work or school for two days. It was a peaceful protest that shook up both South African President F.W. de Klerk and Buthelezi.

And in Durban, the women stayed in Kwamashu Township with Nathi Ncobo and his family. Ncobo lived in Albany in 1990 and 1991 with coalition members.

It was in Durban, a port city on the Indian Ocean, that Michelson and Kawola saw some of the most desperate living conditions in a squatter camp.

"You think of [the camps] as temporary," Kawola says. But people can live there for years. In Kwamashu, there was no electricity, so there were no lights at night and the people lived in fear of crime.

"Water is a concern every day," Kawola adds. They saw several hundred families using a single outhouse. They saw one water tap for 3,000 families, and it was turned off each weekday at 5 PM. "People spend hours getting to work," she says, then they have to come home and find water.

It's a very dangerous time," says Michelson of South Africa after returning to Albany. "There is an obvious danger because the state-sponsored violence has disrupted the

negotiating process. It's dangerous because of the frustrations that build when negotiations don't happen the way people had hoped. It's dangerous because the eye of the international community is not on South Africa any more, like it once was."

The Capital District Coalition Against Apartheid and Racism is certainly one group that will keep watching southern Africa. Formed in 1981 to lead demonstrations against the South African Springboks, a rugby team invited to play in the Albany area that year, the coalition's efforts have earned it an international reputation.

"We find many people doing solidarity work all over the country," says Nesbitt, whose own efforts have taken him to 48 states. "But [the coalition] stands out because we don't find people doing it at the same level for so many years."

In 1990, the coalition presented SWAPO with a check for \$1,500, part of the city of Albany's settlement with Michelson and two others who were illegally arrested during the anti-Springboks protests. In Namibia, Michelson learned the coalition's money had helped purchase a computer SWAPO used to keep track of the 1990 elections. And a \$1,000 contribution, raised during the coalition's 10th anniversary celebration last year, was used by the ANC to set up a rural radio network in South Africa.

Once negotiations started between the ANC and the South African government, however, worldwide pressure to boycott South Africa faded. The country's athletes, for example, were allowed back into the Olympics this year. In fact, efforts to create a new South African government where whites and blacks will have equal votes have stalled. In late September, Zulu leader Buthelezi withdrew his Inkatha party from the talks.

According to a recent *New York Times* story, Buthelezi has allied with the rulers of two other black South African homelands. And the *Times* reports that he has been "flirting" with conservative whites "who would rather see South Africa fragmented into ethnic principalities than handed over to Mr. Mandela." The most ominous scenario, the *Times* imagined, is that the Zulu chief would lead a separatist bloc aimed at shattering South Africa like Yugoslavia.

"Our task," says Michelson, "is to get South Africa back on the agenda and support the ongoing struggle there."

Instead of forgetting about South Africa, Michelson wants to talk about the "interconnectedness of the violence in the whole southern Africa region." As long as Mozambique remains in turmoil, Namibia fails to prosper and Angola totters on the brink of a return to civil war, pressure on the apartheid government to reform is weakened.

"We're talking about the violence in South Africa that is sponsored by apartheid," Michelson concludes, "and the violence apartheid has organized across its borders."

Michelson and Kawola saw little, if any, actual violence. During their nights in Maputo, they heard gunfire in the streets, and a visit to Mozambique's western border area was impossible because of the fighting.

But they saw the day-to-day pain of life under apartheid in three different countries. "You realize how long its going to take for that to disappear," Michelson says. "The struggle there will continue until the people have freedom. They make that very clear. That is not in question." ■



**Capital District Coalition
Against Apartheid
and Racism**

Box 3002 - Pine Hills Station
Albany, New York 12202
A Project of the Social Justice Center

Thursday, September 24, 1992, 7:00-9:00 p.m.
Albany Public Library
Washington Avenue, Albany, New York

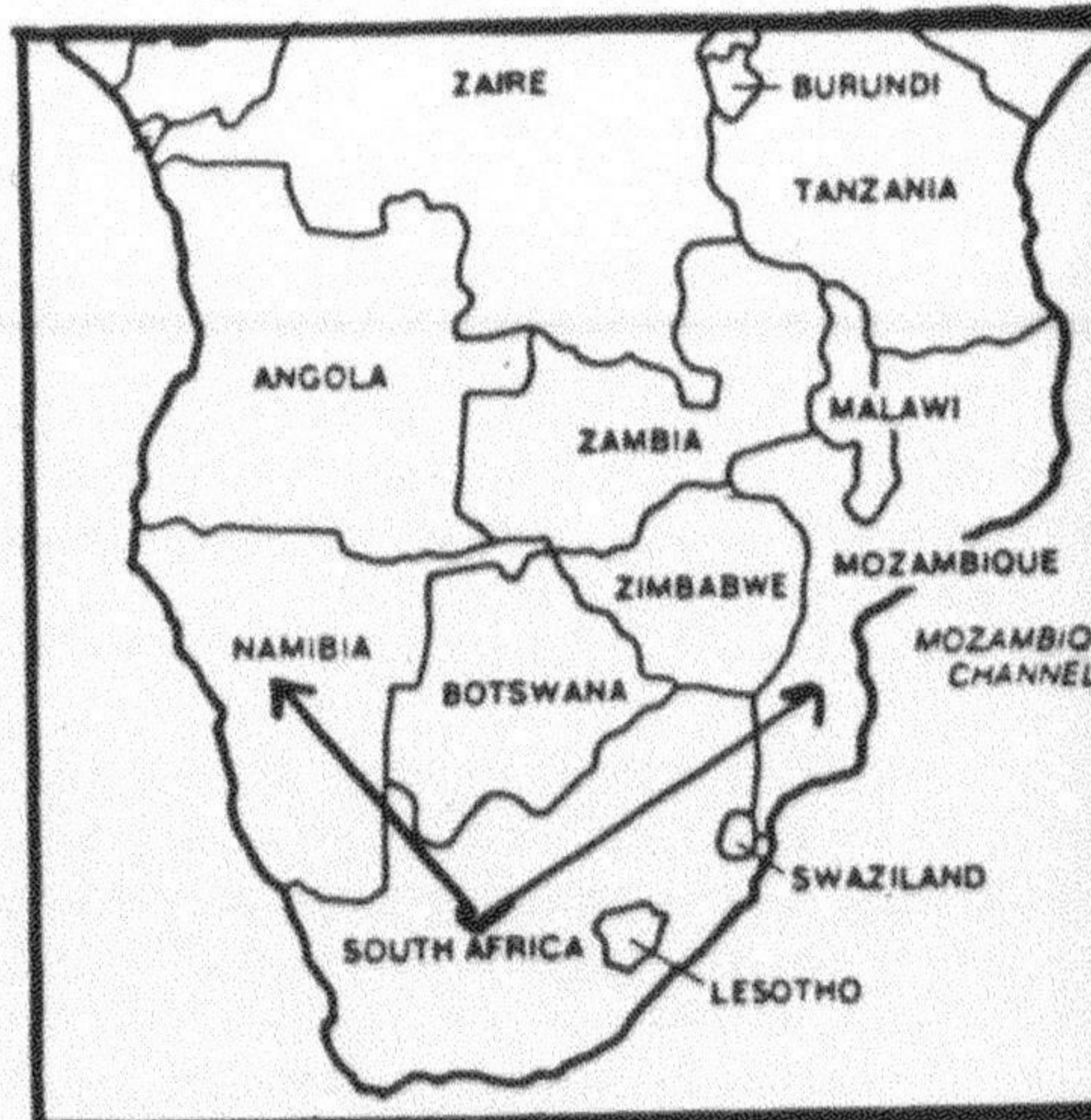
**APARTHEID
IS NOT DEAD
AN EYEWITNESS REPORT**

SLIDE SHOW AND DISCUSSION

CD-CAAR Members Vera Michelson & Eileen Kawola visited Southern Africa this past July with Prexy Nesbitt of the Mozambique Solidarity Office. The delegation met with government officials in Mozambique and Namibia and ANC officials in South Africa. They spoke to people on the ground everywhere they went - including former RENAMO boy "bandits" and families whose lives have been terrorized by RENAMO violence in Mozambique; former SWAPO exiles and Cuban solidarity workers in Namibia; people who have lost their homes to Inkatha violence, former Robben Island prisoners, and squatter camp dwellers in South Africa. They also had the opportunity to visit with families and old friends in South Africa.

At this September forum, Vera Michelson and Eileen Kawola will give a report on what's happening in:
**NAMIBIA, MOZAMBIQUE
and SOUTH AFRICA**

(for more information, call 438-0309)



Siena College:
President's Office for Diversity, Committee on Teaching,
Women and Minorities Committee, History Club and
Phi Alpha Theta
present

Eye Witness Report and Slide Show from Southern Africa

**Robert Nii Nartey, Ph.D. - Assistant Professor of History,
Siena College**

**Vera Michelson and Eileen Kawola - anti-apartheid activists,
Capital District Coalition Against Apartheid and Racism**
Michelson and Kawola were members of a fact finding delegation which recently
visited Southern Africa (Namibia, Mozambique and South Africa).



Place: Siena College
Route 9, Loudonville, New York
Roger Bacon Hall, Room 202
Date: March 3, 1993
Time: 8:00 p.m.