

THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS IN SETTLING DISPUTES

Patricia Baigrie, who lives locally, spoke to Faringdon Peace Group about her 38 years working for the United Nations in a wide variety of roles in different countries across the world. Her talk concentrated on the elections in which she was involved, particularly in southern Africa.

We were surprised to learn that the United Nations can only become involved in a dispute if invited to do so by a country's government. The request goes before the Security Council and, if accepted, to the General Assembly where the timing, financing and personnel details are worked out. Member states are asked to supply troops, police and civilians as necessary. Governments are often quite happy to supply troops as they are fed and clothed by the UN throughout the operation which means substantial savings!

Patricia's first mission was to Namibia. Under the rules of the Committee of 24 on the Decolonisation of Africa, countries could come to the UN to plead for independence from colonial powers. She helped to organise and monitor the first free and fair elections in 1989 which led to Namibia's independence from South Africa in 1990. People first had to be registered, including returning refugees and those who had been in exile during the apartheid period, and electoral rolls created. Hands were stamped with ink that showed up under UV light. Much reassurance was needed from the UN workers as there was still widespread fear that South Africa was behind the elections and would know how they had voted. For those who couldn't read, photos of the candidate or symbols of their party were added to the ballot paper. The election passed off peacefully – a success for the UN.

Patricia also assisted with the first elections for citizens of all races in South Africa in 1994, which the UN had been asked to supervise by the 2 main parties. People were already registered, which made the job simpler, but intense diplomacy was required on the day itself to persuade the Zulus not to boycott the vote. The election was another success and resulted in the first Government of National Unity under Nelson Mandela.

Unfortunately this was not the case in Angola, which had been devastated by 15 years of civil war. Although the UN collected huge numbers of weapons and ran a successful election under difficult circumstances, UNITA did not accept the results and the country was plunged back into civil war.

The last election that Patricia talked about was in Mozambique, which was also recovering from 15 years of civil war. However, in this case the 2 main parties honoured their agreement that the loser would form the opposition. Following these successful elections, the country had the largest GNP in Africa until the disastrous floods of 2000.

Patricia concluded that the UN's biggest stumbling block is the often the self interest of its own member states. In conflict situations the UN cannot interfere unless invited, and even then UN troops can only act as a buffer, as peacekeepers cannot fight back. Although the UN is far from perfect, the world would be a much more dangerous place without it.