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Introduction to *Southwest Africa:
The UN's Stepchild*

[October 1959]
Montgomery, Ala.

On 31 July 1959 Homer Jack, associate director of the American Committee on Africa, asked King to write an introduction for a pamphlet to "inform the American people about South West Africa—a subject about which they know practically nothing."¹ King agreed to provide the introduction on 5 August and sent it to Jack on 31 August, observing that the pamphlet will serve an important purpose: "I, myself, learned a lot by reading it, for my knowledge of Southwest Africa has been quite limited."²

Africa is today a continent in transition. It is the land in which a great social revolution is taking place. You can hear the deep rumbling of this from the Sahara Desert to the Cape of Good Hope. Africans are united in their deep yearning for freedom and human dignity. They are determined to end the exploitation of their lives and to have a full share in their own future and destiny. The story of this struggle for freedom and independence is a familiar one. It has been told by every major American periodical and dramatized on practically every television channel. It is the theme of numerous speeches and the subject of many fireside discussions.

Despite this unusual coverage of African affairs, there are still areas in this vast and complex continent whose problems and conditions are little known to Americans. One such area is South West Africa. About the only thing most of us Americans know about South West Africa is its geographical location in the emerging continent; northwest of apartheid.

This tragic land for many years was a German colony. After World War I it was a League of Nations mandate under the Union of South Africa. After World War II and the demise of the League, South Africa tried to annex South West Africa. The League's legal successor—the United Nations—so far has prevented this action.³ The U.N. has not, however, yet been able to prevent South Africa from treating the Africans in this territory with the same regime of oppression and segregation as it gives the non-whites in its own territory.

While Christianity has been timid in too much of Africa, I am glad that Michael Scott—a clergyman—for more than a decade has represented the Herero people of South West Africa when South Africa refused to allow their representatives to

1. Jack also indicated that the pamphlet would be distributed at the fourteenth session of the United Nations General Assembly.

2. In his 31 July request, Jack enclosed "the kind of ideas one might put into an introduction" but added that King was "perfectly free to write anything you want" (see also King to Jack, 5 August 1959).

3. Portions of South West Africa—later known as Namibia—were first declared a German colony in 1884. South Africa seized the region during World War I and was granted a League of Nations mandate to manage the territory following the war. After World War II, the newly created United Nations formed a Trusteeship Council for territories that were not self-governing. South Africa, hoping to annex the territory, refused to place South West Africa under United Nations trusteeship, beginning a struggle that did not end until Namibia gained independence on 21 March 1990.

appear before the U.N.⁴ Now two or three residents have managed to tell the U.N. their own story.⁵ It is not a pleasant story. At places, it has a nightmarish effect and points up some of the most tragic expressions of man's inhumanity to man. It is the story of more than 450,000 people constantly being trampled over by the iron feet of injustice.

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This is the story the American people should know—one which their delegates at the U.N. should act upon. If for no other reason, we should know this story and act upon it because injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.
Montgomery, Alabama, U.S.A.

PD. *Southwest Africa: The UN's Stepchild* (New York: American Committee on Africa, 1959).

4. Jack had arranged a meeting between King and Scott in March 1957 during the Ghanaian independence ceremonies (see Introduction in *Papers* 4:8–9).

5. In the late 1950s Hereros Fanuel Jariretundu Konzonguisi and Mburumba Kerina testified before the United Nations Committee on South West Africa.