

She who brings mercy - Angela King heads UNOMSA

When Angela King arrived in Johannesburg to head up the United Nations Observer Mission in South Africa in September 1992, South Africa was still under sanction to end apartheid, thus there was no formal UN presence in the country other than a UNHCR office addressing the return of refugees. The Security Council had decided to establish UNOMSA to observe and report regularly on what was happening in the transition to a non-racial democracy.

Angela quickly realised that the role of “observer” was laden with complexity. The task required a presence in risky and violent situations, and the term drew criticism as suggesting a passive, even indifferent United Nations. UNOMSA under Angela’s astute guidance, established itself as the eyes and ears of the international community (in partnership with the OAU, the EU and the Commonwealth States) but, more than that, rapidly gained acceptance, access and credibility as low-key facilitator, negotiator and advocate of viable options to advance peace and stability.

It must be recalled that in this period, South Africa was writing a Constitution, setting up peace structures and preparing itself for its first free and fair elections. It was also a time of frequent and stunning violence -- white-on-black, black-on-black and black on white -- a high incidence of bombings, murders and rapes, state sponsored brutality, and constant demonstrations, marches and funerals. Tiny UNOMSA was involved in addressing all of this and Angela was personally involved in UNOMSA’s efforts. She was not the type of Chief who stayed in the office and let her staff do the hard work. These are just two examples of her engagement:

The day of the funeral of ANC leader Chris Hani, assassinated on 10 April 1993 by white supremacists, UNOMSA teams were deployed to monitor the thousands who gathered in his memory, and the dozens who watched with hostility. Angela was there on the ground, in the dust, among the crowds, and keeping track of the whereabouts of her observers over many hours. She did not leave the smoky chaos of the graveyard area until the last bus of mourners and the last of the observer teams had departed.

The day a group of UN/EU/Commonwealth representatives, including Angela, went to a South African Defense Force training base to look into allegations of manipulation of land ownership by the authorities, it was pouring rain on deeply rutted dirt roads. Angela knew that the internationals’ impartiality would be questioned if they rode in the marked SADF four wheel drive vehicles. The low-clearance mini-bus used instead inevitably became mired in the mud. All got out and pushed, including Angela.

Angela made many tough decisions and took responsibility for them. She also consulted her staff, and respected and relied on their judgment. Angela was an exacting, even demanding boss but she was also the boss who organised Zulu lessons for the office in Johannesburg, joining the 7 am lessons as a full participant in the singing and dancing

that was the instructor's favoured pedagogical tool. Angela took great pleasure in telling people one thing in particular that we learned: that "unomsa" in Zulu means "she who brings mercy".

During Angela's 21 months in South Africa, she had to manage both expectations and opposition. Members of the ANC and others who had worked for decades to end apartheid, initially wanted a mission of at least 5000 military and police. From this quarter, hopes were high. On the other hand, members of the ruling National Party and other conservative elements opposed the Mission, for reasons ranging from a belief that South Africans could resolve their own problems, to outright animosity to a new order. Angela believed in being direct so early on she set herself the task of meeting the leadership of all political entities. She met regularly with the leaders of the main political parties, among them FW de Klerk, Nelson Mandela, Mangosutho Buthelezi, Clarence Makwetu, King Zwethilini and the heads of all ten Bantustans. She sought advice from many and varied religious and civil society leaders, as well as leading academicians and writers. At this level, Angela represented the UN with distinction.

Angela worked long hours and spared no effort to fulfill the mandate given to the Mission by the Security Council. Angela's disciplined, insistent, poised and informed approach gained access and respect at the highest and lowest levels, among circles and political parties black and white. In the words of one of her team upon learning of her death, Angela King was UNOMSA.

*Composed from writings by
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