

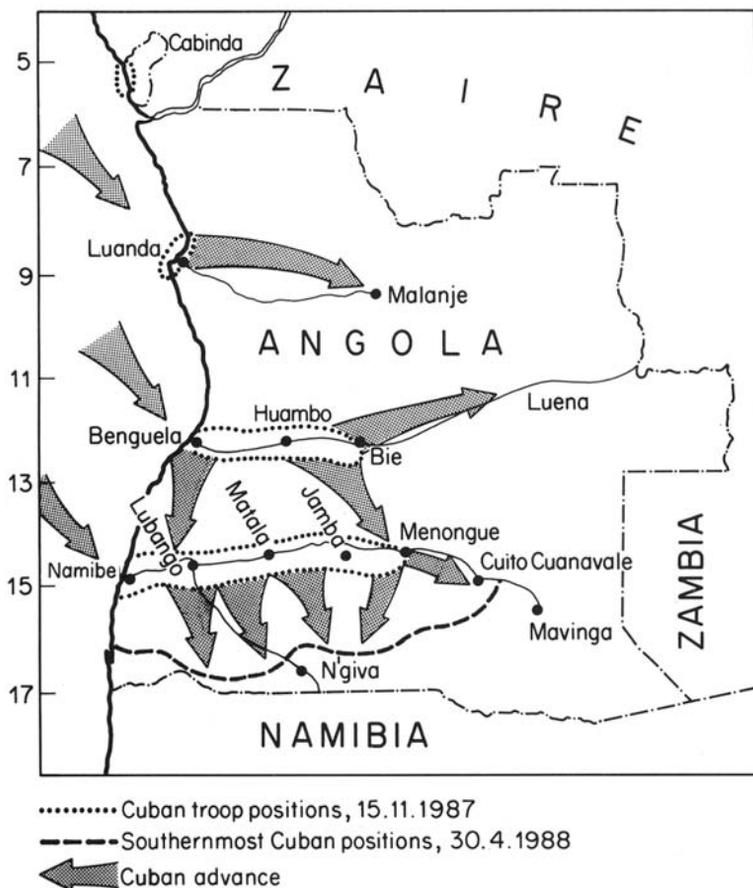
Cuba and Southern Africa

After eight months of talks in Geneva between Angola, Cuba, South Africa and the United States, 1988 is drawing to a close with the distinct possibility that Pretoria may have been forced to end ten years of procrastination and redraw its regional strategy in such a way as to allow for an independent Namibia, with a complete change in the power base of its UNITA ally in Angola. As late as the beginning of November, as the target date for the implementation of UN Resolution 435 passed, relations between the four parties had soured so dramatically that preparations for deepening regional war were underway with a massive build-up of South African troops on the Namibian border with Angola. But in the middle of November, after the Cuban and Angolan delegations had made significant concessions on the timetable for the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, the South Africans found themselves isolated from the US delegation for the first time.

For the Reagan Administration, success in the Geneva talks was one of the background elements in the campaign for the re-election of a Republican candidate in the November presidential election. State Department strategists had long believed that the long-term stability of South Africa itself could best be assured by a withdrawal from the quagmire of Namibia, and that a government headed by the independence movement SWAPO would constitute no threat to Pretoria. American officials made strenuous efforts to persuade the South African military of this analysis throughout the negotiations. Just how important for the US government was the illusion of success was revealed a month before the election with the rare briefing of the *New York Times* by the chief US negotiator, Dr Chester Crocker, who gave a studied and completely erroneous picture of virtual agreement.¹ The instant rebuttal by the chief Cuban delegate, Carlos Aldana, that 'such optimism unfortunately does not correspond with the facts', was not carried by any mainstream media—a characteristic silence with regard to the important strand in the history of Cuba's role in Angola represented by these negotiations.

Of all the foreign policy theatres in which the Reagan administration has intervened—Central America, the Middle East, Kampuchea and Afghanistan, for instance—none has been made to pay as terrible a human and political price as Southern Africa. The monetary cost of regional

¹ *New York Times*, 10 October 1988.



destabilization between 1980 and 1986 is estimated at over \$30 billion. This staggering figure is twice the combined total of foreign aid received by the nine Southern African Development Coordinating Council (SADCC) countries over the same period. Much of the sabotage is never repaired and the region's infrastructure has gone into a sharp downward spiral. Not surprisingly six of the nine are among the twenty-five poorest countries in the world and their debt-service ratios range between 80 and 150 per cent. The level of human suffering is incalculable, though bare statistics give an indication that this is Dante's world: from Mozambique 800,000 have fled into neighbouring countries from the armed bandits who teach children to kill, and keep adults as naked slave porters; 200,000 children are orphaned; half a million people are displaced within Angola, and one child in four dies before their fifth birthday; a million people, or half the urban population, need urgent food and health aid according to the UN; no one has ever counted the peasant women and children mutilated by mines, probably as numerous as the legless soldiers tapping their way with crutches around the streets of every town. The decision by successive US governments not to recognize the Angolan government throughout the thirteen years since independence has ensured that Angola suffers a similar isolation from international aid as

was used to punish Vietnam for the same crime—military defeat of a US client. And the prospect of a Republican victory signalled the possible raising of that price as a newly confident Pretoria attempted to break its international isolation and to impose a very different kind of peace in Angola (with Savimbi) and in Namibia (with a client regime instead of SWAPO).

South Africa's First Defeat

The latest phase in Southern Africa's war opened with the dramatic series of military defeats inflicted on South Africa by Cuban, Angolan and SWAPO forces in the first six months of this year. On 16 November 1987, the Cuban Central Committee made the decision to reinforce its troops in Angola to counter a massive new South African commitment of infrastructure and logistics in northern Namibia, begun in March in preparation for the most ambitious offensive since 1975. That decision in Havana is likely to be seen in the future as equal in historical importance to the arrival of the first Cuban fighting contingent on 4 October 1975, which prevented South Africa (encouraged by Washington) from installing a client FNLA/UNITA government in Luanda.²

Just how much the regional situation has changed in the last year can be measured against President Fidel Castro's defiant commitment at the Non-Aligned summit in Harare in 1986 to 'remain in Angola until the end of apartheid'. At that time, morale was sinking throughout the frontline states as Pretoria escalated violence inside and outside South Africa. Thus Mozambique was living through its most desperate military crisis as Mozambique National Resistance bandits, organized by the South African Defence Force through Malawi, sought to cut the country in half and take the coastal town of Quelimane. Two months later, the acute tension with South Africa culminated in the murder of President Samora Machel in a plane crash on the border between the two countries. In Angola, FAPLA government troops had not recovered from the serious losses sustained under South African bombing at Mavinga the previous autumn; three Southern African capitals were still reeling from similar sorties flown against them during the attempt at negotiations by the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group; inside South Africa itself the State of Emergency was taking an unprecedented toll of anti-apartheid organizations, and the new weapon of vigilante violence had been unleashed by the state at Crossroads; and Namibian independence was off the international agenda as Pretoria prepared its own Rhodesia-style UDI.

For the first time in the decade since independence, military leaders in the Frontline states were discussing the previously unthinkable possibility that 'the inevitable end of apartheid' was much further off than they publicly predicted. Their private consensus was that as long as the white regime was in power in Pretoria, its attempts to break its neighbours and other Frontline states would escalate to the point where more Nkomati agreements, like the one into which Mozambique had been forced in

² See Gabriel García Márquez, 'Operation Carlota', *New Left Review* 101/102, February–April 1977.

1984, could become the norm. 'We are involved in a war to the death—it's them or us', said one senior official. In that context Zimbabwean and Tanzanian troops were fighting in Mozambique, but a Cuban military presence in Angola 'until the end of apartheid' was the only perceived guarantee that Pretoria would not win that life-and-death struggle. When Fidel flew from Harare to Luanda after making that speech, he was received with quite exceptional warmth and reverence, as, literally, the saviour of Angola's independence.

Last November, however, the Cubans decided that the deepening social, military and political crisis within South Africa itself, the fashion for regional detente being set in Moscow and Washington, and the passionate desire of the outgoing Reagan Administration to claim credit for a Cuban withdrawal, opened up the opportunity for the allied forces in Angola, suitably strengthened with some of Havana's finest military cadres, to make a sudden push for a precise objective. The implementation of Resolution 435 on Namibian independence need no longer await the end of apartheid but could in fact be a significant step towards it. It was a high-risk decision, not least because FAPLA was facing grave difficulties at that time. The South African offensive which started with the improvement of infrastructure in northern Namibia in April 1987 was the most ambitious operation since 1975 according to Angolan military analysts. It aimed at the capture of Cuito Cuanavale and a completely new strategic base for UNITA to attack central Angola. At the same time, FAPLA was facing myriad attacks from the estimated twenty thousand UNITA forces—well equipped by South Africa, funded by the US and increasingly trained in Morocco—and the Israeli-aided UNITA facilities in Zaire. UNITA attacks in the east and in new target areas in the north appear to have caught FAPLA ill prepared. Logistical failures too meant that some units ran short of food as well as equipment, with obvious repercussions on morale in Luanda.

The Cuban reinforcement operation in January rapidly changed the mood among the Angolan military. Cuban commanders stress that in the weeks leading up to the battle for Cuito Cuanavale in March FAPLA units played a 'heroic' role fighting alongside Cuban specialists in the area. 'The extent of the South African military crisis is more acute than has been generally understood,' said Ronnie Kasrils, a senior ANC military official, in a recent interview. 'Following the defeat at Cuito and the politically unacceptable loss of so many 19-year-old white conscripts, their acknowledged loss of superiority to the Cubans and Angolans in the air and the outclassing of many of the Armscor weapons such as the G5 (long-range artillery) which used to be considered unanswerable, the South African generals are in deep trouble—crisis really is the word.'

The Twin Crisis

Compounding the military crisis with a social one, the fighting in Angola and Namibia was clearly the issue which brought the 143 white youths to public refusal of military service this summer. In addition the revelation that the South African intelligence services have been using young white women in high-risk attempts to infiltrate the ANC has brought the undeclared war deep into hitherto immune white suburbia. It was against

this background that Pretoria went to the conference table at a London hotel in May 1988, using consummate skill in public relations and disinformation to obscure the retreat of its defeated army inside Angola. The London meeting also served as an occasion to present a new reasonable South Africa ready and waiting to give Namibia independence at last under the terms of the old UN Resolution 435. This was to be the first step in a far-reaching campaign to win international respectability for a 'reformed' apartheid regime—a campaign which, six months later, had paid off with visits by the South African leadership to six black African capitals never before (with the exception of Blantyre) prepared to receive them. For the South Africans the series of negotiating meetings in Brazzaville, Cairo, Geneva and New York introduced the image of a normal, viable interlocutor in state-to-state relations. The unfortunate visits to South Africa by the Pope and the UN Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar, followed by President Botha's skillful capitalization on the funeral of his close friend Franz-Josef Strauss to visit Switzerland, Portugal and the Ivory Coast, provided a badly needed series of public relations triumphs for a National Party government fearful of advances by the far-right Conservative Party, and a humiliating failure to coopt other ethnic groups, in the October elections.

From the day the first quadripartite talks began in London in May, the military situation moved even more decisively against South Africans as combined Angolan/Cuban and SWAPO units pushed south to end the de facto no-go situation in Cunene province on the border with Namibia. After several heavy engagements most of the South African forces, together with the Namibian black conscript units who sometimes fought in UNITA uniforms, retreated over the border, and Cuban engineering units working round the clock under floodlights rapidly put in place anti-aircraft weapons to protect new forward airstrips at Cahama and Xandongo.

At the same time the Angolans moved their southern military command into Lubango, unifying the command structures over Cunene and Cuando Cubango provinces. By June the South African generals knew their forces inside Angola were not only beaten but trapped. At a bilateral meeting in Brazzaville a top-level negotiating team attempted to woo the Angolans into an 'agreement between Africans' which would leave Namibia out of the picture and swop a SADF retreat from Angola for a Cuban withdrawal. A demilitarized zone along the Namibian border was proposed, and the Angolans were requested to leave the Ruacana dam area under South African occupation. For the first time the informal proposal surfaced that ANC bases be removed from Angola in return for a cessation of SADF support for UNITA. However, this whole attempt to re-run the scenario of the 1984 Nkomati accord with Mozambique foundered on the fact that this time it was South Africa that was facing military crisis.

In the subsequent rounds of four-party talks the South Africans made one more attempt, in Cairo, to play the dominant role. They demanded a Cuban pull-out from Angola over the same seven-month period that Resolution 435 provides for a South African military withdrawal from Namibia. The US delegation led by Dr Chester Crocker was obliged to

rewrite its allies' proposal in order to prevent the collapse of the negotiations.

Crocker's adroit and inaccurate briefings—to the effect that the Cairo compromise was obtained through Soviet pressure on the Cuban and Angolan delegations—masked for most of the mainstream press the fact that Pretoria, while trying to sabotage the real content of the negotiations, could not afford to let them fail too soon with SADF units at the mercy of the Cubans inside Angola. Indeed, Crocker's successful attempt to portray a replay of Afghanistan in Angola was useful in George Bush's election campaign as it reinforced the image of a Washington-mediated superpower relationship dominating regional conflicts. The Western media's slavish following of such guidance was effectively buttressed by some less than sophisticated briefings from Moscow sources made fashionable by glasnost. 'Russians Seek Deal in Africa: Textbooks of Revolution Give Way to a Search for Peaceful Solutions' (*Observer*, 25 September 1988) was a classic presentation of the supposed 'major policy revamp' by the USSR. In the same article by the influential South African journalist Alistair Sparks, a senior member of the Moscow Institute for African Studies, Yevgeny Tarabrin, was quoted as grossly insulting the Angolan military, and as completely failing to understand the role of Jonas Savimbi in the South African and US attempt to alter the political options of the Angolan government. In the context of numerous Soviet faux pas in international seminars and other fora, many jumped to the conclusion that a withdrawal of Soviet support was underway. In fact, such Soviet intellectuals were clearly poorly informed about the substantial Soviet re-supply operations which supported the Cuban/Angolan military offensive. To have been better informed they need have gone no further than to watch some videos from Cuban television, which in the first ten months of 1988 reported more about the Cuban engagement than in the previous ten years.

Washington's Role

US military and political support for Savimbi was demonstrated by his visit to the United States during the period of negotiations, and by the joint US/Zairean military manoeuvres which equipped UNITA's northern bases in case Namibian independence forced it to give up Jamba in the south. Despite these ostentatious displays, however, the United States managed to score a public relations triumph as mediator in the conflict, and its vital role in support of South Africa was simply left out of the picture. (More astonishing still, the Angolans chose to state publicly that US support for UNITA was not on the table at the ongoing negotiations. It was in fact one part of the hidden agenda which stalled the talks in October.) There seems little doubt that the Cubans could have hit the retreating South African forces much harder than they did, causing many more casualties. The choice not to do so fits into a pattern of almost exaggerated politeness on the Cuban/Angolan side. 'The Cubans calculated that a public humiliation of the South Africans would be too much for Washington to swallow, the right would have been screaming about the communist threat to the region. So they gave Crocker all the public relations points he wanted', said one Frontline States' official after a briefing from Fidel in Havana.

Between July and November, the negotiations at Geneva, Brazzaville and New York showed the Angolan/Cuban delegation to be flexible and conciliatory, and ready for considerable telescoping of the original four-year withdrawal proposal down to twenty-seven months. This attitude, together with Washington's anxiety for the beginning of a settlement on Cuban withdrawal before the November elections, pushed the South Africans to the point where it became difficult for them to draw back from the 435 process. UN officials began to arrive in Windhoek in early October, and a decision was reached on the composition of the proposed 7,000-strong UN monitoring force for the independence process.

It soon became clear, however, that the UN arrival was premature as hard bargaining developed on issues that had been implied but not spelt out in the 14-point draft agreed at the New York meeting in August—particularly on the ending of South African and US aid to Savimbi. For South Africa's generals and their friends in Washington, it would be a serious defeat—as important as the retreat from Namibia—to give up their most useful regional policy tool. And the mooted quid pro quo of a closure of ANC bases in Angola would be a cheap price for the Angolan government and its allies to pay. Again Pretoria's attempt to replay Nkomati with the undertone of defeat for the ANC could convince only its own constituency. The ANC could train its guerrilla army in at least four African countries that would be in some ways easier to work in than Angola.

Even if Namibian independence is not, after all, won by a combination of some of these compromises, the new political era opened by the first military defeat for South Africa will affect the internal political situation for both Angola and South Africa as dramatically as that of Namibia itself. Nor will anyone in the region soon forget the lesson that Cuba's military actions and readiness for sacrifice changed the balance of power as years of Western diplomacy could not. The democratic movement within South Africa has been indelibly marked by the experience. And in Angola the action has strengthened a second generation who have now fought and won battles against the South African army and Washington's UNITA proxies as decisive as those of the liberation war against Portuguese fascism.

As the year ends, the Cuban military presence in southern Angola remains the most important factor in the outcome of the negotiations. Pretoria is faced with extremely awkward choices. Firstly, it could use its troops massed on the Namibian border to re-enter Angola and take on the Cubans—a politically impossible course that would involve high casualties. Secondly, it could accept Resolution 435 and leave Namibia in order to get the Cubans out of the region. Such a strategic volte-face, in which the implications of defeat would be impossible to disguise, would have incalculable political consequences at home, both in the confidence it would ignite in the black community and in the setback for the morale of many whites. The third possibility, now that the SADF forces have been safely extricated from Angola, is simply to let the negotiations drop. This would mean accepting the prospect of an indefinite Cuban presence on the Namibian border and a continuation of both the war with SWAPO and the UNITA war in Angola, on much less favourable terms than in the past. Besides, change in the military situation, which has given SWAPO an

improved rear base and logistic network some two hundred kilometres nearer the Namibian border, would make possible large-scale guerrilla operations inside Namibia and again begin to have unacceptable political costs inside South Africa. Internationally too this would be a costly option, since even Pretoria's US allies are increasingly turning their attention to internal solutions to the South African crisis, such as the drawing up of a federal constitution, which depend on having a 'moderate' Nationalist government to promote.