



THEME

***The Battle of Cuito Cuanavale and its
consequences for Angola***

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BACKGROUND IN BRIEF

During the year of 1975, Angola was rocked by an intense battle between the three main liberation movements which had fought against the Portuguese troops, notably, the MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) led by Agostinho Neto, who began the armed struggle for national liberation on 4 February 1961; the FNLA (National Front for the Liberation of Angola), headed by Holden Roberto and finally, UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), headed by Jonas Savimbi.

The MPLA was fundamentally supported by Cuba and the Soviet Union, and occupied Luanda, the country's capital, as well as an extensive part of the country; the FNLA, which was supported by Americans and Zaireans, carried out most of its activities in the north of the country, while UNITA received fundamental support from South Africa and occupied the south and southeast of the country. The Alvor Accords established the date of 11 November 1975 for the declaration of independence in Luanda, resulting in intensified fighting during the second semester and increasing the importance of occupying the capital.

The FNLA forces, reinforced by Zairean army battalions and more than one hundred South African mercenaries and advisors, had already penetrated Angola from the North.

They unleashed a strong offensive up to Luanda, and were only stopped on 23 October of the same year in Quifangondo, a mere 25 kilometres from the capital, after having already occupied most of northern Angola.

In the meantime, President Mobuto had set his sights on the petroleum-rich Cabinda province, which was also under threat from Zairean forces, considering that Cabinda is separated from the rest of the country.

South Africa was ruled by the racist "Apartheid" regime, with profoundly unjust laws which allowed the white minority to dominate the wide majority of blacks who inhabited the country, which was the most developed and powerful in Africa, both in economic and in military terms.

For more than fifty years, the South African regime had maintained control of Namibia, a territory bordering Angola to the South. In the month of August, it had occupied Caluénque, an area in Angola situated 16 kilometres from the north of the border with Namibia. This was done under the pretext of protecting the hydroelectric facilities which had been built there in cooperation with the Portuguese during the first half of the seventies, with the national objective of providing electricity and water to Namibia and parts of southern Angola. Their plan was thus to guarantee its operation. However, not being content with the plan, in mid-October, a strong South African grouping composed of armoured vehicles, artillery and mechanised infantry, operating in coordination with UNITA and the FNLA, launched an offensive in a northerly direction, with the aim of stopping the MPLA from gaining power in Luanda in the month of November.

They rapidly occupied the main cities and villages in the south of Angola and continued to proceed slowly in a northerly direction, at a pace of about seventy kilometres per day, so that at the beginning of November they were about thirty kilometres south of the capital, and were a huge threat, due to their force of arms.

In view of the extreme gravity of the situation that had been created, the Government of Cuba, which had already dispatched about four hundred military instructors to Angola at Agostinho Neto's request, in order to contribute to the organisation and preparation of the armed wing of the MPLA, the Peoples Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA), started dispatching Cuban combat units. The first batch arrived on time to cooperate with the Angolan progressive forces in defeating a decisive attack against Luanda by FNLA and Zairean units on 10 November. On that same day, the Angolans and their Cuban instructors also defeated Zairean aggression against Cabinda.

On 11 November 1975, Agostinho Neto became the first president of the newly born Peoples Republic of Angola. A few days later, South African and UNITA forces were stopped about two hundred kilometres south of Luanda. While the war spread, Cuban soldiers continued to arrive and on 04 December the offensive against FNLA and Zairean troops on the Northern Front began, while on the Southern Front an active defence was maintained against the South Africans and Unita. On 18 January 1976, the Angolan and Cuban troops had already expelled the FNLA and

Zairean forces from a considerable part of the North region, while battles continued on that Front until mid-February.

In mid-January, the South Africans slowly began to retreat towards the south and on 5 February Angolan and Cuban troops began the offensive against the racist South African forces and UNITA. The units of the Pretoria regime had been withdrawing in view of the advance by Angolan and Cuban forces. As a result, on 27 March 1976, the last South African soldiers had left Angola.

The military defeat of South Africa also resulted in the defeat of UNITA, whose main forces took refuge in the extreme southeast of the country in an obscure region, which the Portuguese called **“the land at the end of the world”**, in Cuando Cubango province.

Initially the reduction of the Cuban military contingent started, involving more than 20.000 soldiers, but more immediately South African assistance to UNITA intensified through the border with Namibia, in an area where many violations of Angolan air space were detected. The South Africans also began to launch frequent attacks on Angolan border posts, under the pretext that they were pursuing elements belonging to Swapo, which was fighting for the liberation of Namibia and was led by Sam Nujoma.

Little by little, South African raids began in the south of Angola with increasing intensity. During such operations, they wanted to use the strong points of the SADF (South African Defence Forces) to full advantage: its large contingencies of well armed and trained soldiers, heavy weaponry and air control.

All these factors caused an interruption in the withdrawal of Cuban troops.

In 1978, the South Africans occupied Calueque again and stayed there for ten years, under the pretext of guaranteeing the operation of this hydroelectric complex. In May of the same year, parachute forces supported by aeroplanes attacked a Namibian refugee camp in the Angolan area of Cassinga, 250 kilometres from the border with Namibia, resulting in the death of hundreds, mainly women, children and old people, while other mechanised forces carried out incursions against other targets located in the south of Angola at a distance of about fifteen to thirty kilometres from the border.

In September, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 435/78 on the independence of Namibia, anticipating a ceasefire in that country, the withdrawal of South African troops and the realisation of free and fair elections monitored by the UN, but South Africa, supported by the main western powers, did not implement this resolution.

In 1979, the racist army carried out new aggressions in the south of Angola, to the extent of air bombardments on Lubango city and the town of Xangongo, situated at three hundred and at eighty kilometres from the border respectively. In addition, they began to train and equip UNITA battalions in centres situated on the Caprivi strip, north of Namibia. In that year (1979) President Agostinho Neto passed away after an illness, and was replaced by José Eduardo dos Santos.

In 1980, they carried out an incursion which penetrated up to 180 kilometres to the south of Angolan territory and continued for one month, apart from other aggressions of a lesser scale. Similarly, UNITA also occupied Mavinga district, in the extreme southeast of the country, which consolidated its stronghold.

During the years that followed, there were various aggressions by South African forces against Angola, during which they almost annihilated Ondjiva and Xangongo, two Brigades from the former FAPLA. This culminated in the temporary occupation of extensive territories in the south of the country, with control of some regions maintained for about three years, as well as air bombardments of cities and villages on some occasions.

In June 1985, the Angolans commenced a huge offensive from Cuito Cuanavale to the southeast against UNITA Battalions in Mavinga, but in September, when FAPLA Brigades were 25 kilometres away from the village, they were held up by a South African mechanised force with artillery and air support, which had arrived from Namibia to support UNITA forces, and, after bloody battles, FAPLA units withdrew in the direction of Cuito Cuanavale.

In 1986, Unita maintained its strategic position in the central region of the country and extended it to the north, taking advantage of the support of its barracks in the southeast and all kinds of reserves which it had received through the border with Namibia. In

May, there was a large-scale invasion by South African troops, penetrating some tens of kilometres of Angolan territory in specific directions. In August, UNITA forces, supported by South African artillery and air forces, attacked Cuito Cuanavale, but were repelled by FAPLA.

During these last few years, with the increased aggression against Angola by South African forces, the contingent of Cuban troops increased and was already at about thirty-five thousand soldiers by the end of 1986. During this period, the Pretoria regime tried to justify its attacks against Angola, a sovereign country, using its fight against Swapo as a pretext, without taking into account the fact that this organisation was fighting for the liberation of its occupied country, that it was acknowledged by the UN as the sole legitimate representative of the people of Namibia, and was supported by the majority of the international community. In truth, the aim of the Pretoria government was to destabilise Angola, thus obstructing the liberation of Namibia and of South Africa itself.

“South Africa arrived in Angola thirteen years ago, with the primary aim of blocking the red menace, and the secondary aim of striking Swapo bases”.

It must be emphasised that, with its frequent references to “the red menace” existing in the region, the western media tried to misrepresent the essential facts, presenting the struggle of the people of Southern Africa and aggressions of the apartheid regime as manifestations of the struggle between the East and West.

The South Africans equally assured that Cuban troops in Angola were an instrument of Soviet expansion in Africa, trying to hide the fact that their stay was aimed at protecting the country against its aggression, which also was reflected occasionally in the western media.

Cuban troops arrived in Angola in 1979 in support of the MPLA. Although it was thought that their presence was temporary, they remained there, partly to help the country handle the threat represented by South Africa.

At that stage, UNITA had already been at war with the MPLA government for twelve years, demonstrating a surprising vitality, apart from the fact that it was receiving military, economic and

political help mainly from South Africa and the United States of America.

This organisation was structured as a political party and based its ideology and strategy on a mixture of socialist, nationalist and racist ideals adapted to conditions in Angola and cleverly manipulated by its cadres, who managed to gain the support of some of the population.

In his capacity as chairman and high commander of Unita, Savimbi headed all the organisations of the masses, political administration and armed forces which had national authority, and were subordinated by the strategic forces and territorial authorities.

The strategic forces consisted of infantry units, campaign artillery, transmissions and engineering units, which operated in any region of the country. The bulk of these forces was organised into infantry battalions structured in companies and platoons.

The territorial authority politically represented Unita, carried out the administration of designated territories and headed the regional forces. This authority had to guarantee a significant part of the logistics and contribute to the supply and support of the strategic forces. The territorial authority had to create its own unit of atypical composition, but equivalent to a battalion and company. Furthermore, it had to form detachments and guerrilla groups at zone level and organise the population to produce and serve as carriers (transport of supplies).

These organisational elements contributed a great deal to UNITA remaining in the armed struggle for so many years.

Making clever use of psychosocial characteristics of the mainly peasant Angolan population, with a subsistence economy, divided into tribes with ancestral customs, distinct dialects and which had not always lived together peacefully in the past, as well as taking advantage of the after-effects of colonialism and in general other actual characteristics of the population, enabled UNITA to continue to be the main internal destabilising factor in Angola.

Thus in the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale, rather than speaking of two contenders, it is better to speak of four.

- Angola

FAPLA – belonging to the MPLA

FALA – belonging to UNITA

- Foreigners

Cuba
South Africa – linked to the USA

1. THE AREA OF OPERATIONS, POWER AND CONTROL

In the middle of 1987, the OAZR - “previous front of the resistance zone” of FAPLA was formed by the 1st, 25th and 59th Infantry Brigade occupying the Chambinga to Cuatir line 18km east of the District headquarters.

The area of the rearguard was situated up to 4km to the north of the District.

The UNITA force had an advance concentration zone in the region of Lomba, comprising the areas of “Kuzizi, Kuzumbia and Ngombe”.

They consisted of a strong grouping of combat vehicles with South African soldiers in the armoured division and FALA in infantry, as well as two regular independent FALA battalions.

Control: Both parts were controlled as follows:

FAPLA

Full Control - Colonel Vietnam, who had been attending a course in the USSR, had to suspend his studies and return to the country.

Major Ngueto was 2nd Commander of the force.

The operation was headed at the very top by the Minister of Defence, the then Colonel Pedro Maria Tonha “Pedalé”.

FALA

Jonas Malheiro Savimbi exercised full control. Operational Control – Ben-ben and Chilingutila.
Logistical Administrative Control - Bock

Cuba and South Africa

On 07 December 1987, Cuban advisors arrived at the Cuito Cuanaval headquarters and on the 17th of the same month, an Infantry platoon consisting of 40 men arrived.

From the South African side, a unit of combat vehicles and G6 and G7 artillery arrived in the Lomba regions.

Chronology of Events:

October 1987 – The 47th Brigade suffered heavy casualties, abandoning combat vehicles, dead soldiers, armoured transport cars and artillery trailers on the battle field.

It was a difficult time for FAPLA and a favourable one for FALA.

We all knew that when this moment arrived, all the memories would surface and decisions would be precipitated. The patriotic spirit and determination of the Commandants were valuable, and they were able to transfer such emotive power to their subordinates, to sustain them on the battlefield.

The fundamental requirements were focused on recompletion of the units and organisation of the defence system.

November 1987 – detachment of forces from the 21st, 25th, and 59th units to the OAZR, organisation for mutual cooperation, support and preparation of defence with a view to reducing the inefficiency of air attacks and enemy artillery, as well as stopping their advance to the district headquarters.

His Excellency the Minister of Defence suspended some training courses and incorporated senior Officers of recognised

military merit and authority, such as Colonel Vietnam, in the units and commandos.

On 22.11.87, the 25th Brigade was attacked on the right bank of the Chanbinga River, but FALA and the South Africans suffered significant losses in terms of materials and human lives. They withdrew, reorganised themselves and attacked again a few days later, but this time it was the 59th Brigade, and they were repelled again.

On 07 December 1987, Colonel Vietnam, advised by senior Cuban Officers, took control of the forces.

On 17.12.87 a Cuban platoon arrived.

On 23 January 88, UNITA announced that it had taken Cuito Cuanavale (untrue).

On 14 February, UNITA attacked the 59th Brigade, reinforced by a group of mixed FAPLA - FAR combat vehicles, and again suffered heavy casualties.

Aeroplanes from both sides, with the airborne supremacy of the FAPLA-FAR, supported the occupation of a new line of defence, the centre of which was the source of the Tumbé river, 6 kms east of district headquarters.

The early hours of the morning of 3 March 1988 resonated with the sounds of combat vehicles, heavy vehicles and other vehicles assembled for the final attack and break-up of the OAZR. Soldiers were posted as an advance guard under the cover of the maximum darkness of the first 4 hours of the day, to reconnoitre and provide information for the battle which was to take place. At 05:00 in the morning, the FAPLA artillery unit began a cautious offensive on the enemy, using engineering vehicles for the destruction of mines, reinforced with BM-21 mortar bombs and aviation pumps, as well as TNT explosives, causing damage while at the same time being destroyed.

And at the beginning of the afternoon of 23 March 1988, enemy forces withdrew, leaving behind dead and injured people and the debris of war.

The battle of Cuito and Cuanavale ended negatively for both sides, but as the enemy did not succeed in its intents, the victory went to FAPLA.

2. CONSEQUENCES OF THE BATTLE OF CUITO CUANAVALÉ

To date, this battle has had very serious consequences in human terms, due to the destruction of infrastructures, the laying of mines in large areas in the Cuito Cuanavale region without any mine plans by FAPLA, FALA, FAR or the South Africans. Today there are problems with demining which is costing huge sums of money, and also it must be emphasised that there was an unnecessary loss of human lives and consequently there are orphans and widows throughout Angola, and outside the country, as, apart from the FAPLA and FALA forces, Cubans and South Africans also died, such as the Commander of the South African air forces, who died there.

We can therefore applaud the positive consequences, both internally as well as internationally:

- a) Angola gained air supremacy over South Africa;
- b) Angola defeated South Africa's regular armed forces, the most powerful in the region;
- c) Multilateral relations improved between the States at war and the protecting States;
- d) Namibia became independent;
- e) The Apartheid regime in South Africa came to an end and a democratic, lawful regime was born.
- f) It enabled negotiations between the Government and UNITA, which culminated in the Gbadolite and Bicesse accords for peace in Angola, and the creation of a

democratic and lawful State, with one unified army originating from the two Angolan contenders.

Angola has grown from strength to strength, with a most satisfactory gradual development; its economy is stabilising, and it is complying step by step with the millennium goals, thanks to this peace.

III CONCLUSION

The battle of Cuito Cuanavale was a bloody confrontation which took place during the full throes of the cold war. It is upheld by the great world powers, mainly the heads of the world political blocs (Socialism – Capitalism), or even (NATO – WARSAW PACT). In this battle, Angola lost many of its sons, a great deal of infrastructure was destroyed and needs to be rehabilitated or rebuilt, but in truth, it contributed to the country gaining and cultivating enormous international prestige.