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CUITO CUANAVALÉ - A TURNING POINT IN THE LIBERATION STRUGGLE

Introduction

In an unprecedented development, the belligerent Pretoria regime has sat down to discuss an end to its invasion of Angola and occupation of Namibia on five occasions in the short space of three months since May, 1988. Although South Africa's racist rulers lapse into diversions and bluff at these sessions to circumvent or conceal the gravity of their situation, it would appear that for the first time they are coming to the talks in a serious frame of mind. An end to South Africa's illegal occupation of Namibia and its 13 year old war of destabilisation in Angola is on the agenda, carrying with it monumental implications for the liberation struggle in Southern Africa.

What has brought this change of heart in Pretoria? What events have shifted the balance of forces in southern Africa so decisively that South Africa's military rulers have been driven to concentrate their minds on a resolution of the situation in Angola and Namibia? We know that the South African regime is facing an increasing number of insoluble problems at home and abroad, but why this urgency for talks? The answer to this question lies in the battlefields of southern Angola and the heroism of Angolan and Cuban soldiers, and in particular they lie in the battle for Cuito Cuanavale, a small town in Cuanhlo Cubango province, "the land at the end of the world" in south eastern Angola.

FAPLA AND CUBAN TROOPS HALT PRETORIA'S "OPERATION MODULAR"

The beginning of the end of Pretoria's adventurist actions in Angola began with the blunting of "Operation Modular" at Cuito Cuanavale. The racists' fourth major incursion into Angola in the 1980's, "Operation Modular", was designed to support UNITA forces then reeling under the blows of a FAPLA offensive to take Cuanda Cubango province and rout UNITA from its south eastern stronghold. Fearful of the loss of their buffer zone, the SADF

force began an aggression in mid-August from their huge base at Rundu, along the Namibian border. Between 3,000 and 10,000 racist troops, backed by overwhelming air support and the use of long range and highly mobile G5 and G6 artillery pieces, together with UNITA forces, were thrown into battle against FAPLA. Despite this technically superior onslaught, FAPLA was able to hold its ground and inflict some blows against the boers. However, on October 3, FAPLA suffered a setback at a big battle on the Lomba River when their long and overextended supply lines broke down and they were unable to keep the pace with the offensive. Cut off, without arms and ammunition, FAPLA troops were unable to stand and fight; they had to retreat and many were killed. The racists and their UNITA puppets considered the battle won. FAPLA retreated and the combined SADF/UNITA forces advanced on Cuito Cuanavale. Although a small rural town, strategically Cuito Cuanavale held the key to the present struggle for Angola. If it fell into the hands of the racist and reactionary aggressors, Savimbi could claim it as a capital. With such an advance, a huge territory reaching up to the town of Luena on the Benguela rail line some 300km further into the interior would have fallen into UNITA/RSA hands, giving Savimbi control over a considerable part of the country and enabling the racists to partition the country and create a Bantustan.

The gravity of the situation for Angola's national integrity was not lost on President Dos Santos. In November, 1987 he found himself facing a crisis which mirrored the situation confronting President Neto in November 1975 and he acted to defend his country's sovereignty just as his late predecessor had done. The adventurism of Pretoria was to prove to be its own undoing. They had gone too far, creating conditions where the Angolan government could request everything from the Cuban people. President Dos Santos appealed to Fidel Castro for troop reinforcements. He also took the historic decision to request Cuban forces to move south of the Lubango line and to participate in full-scale military operations against the South African invaders. Castro and the Cuban people responded as revolutionary internationalists.

Unbeknown to the enemy in the first week of the battle for Cuito Cuanavale, there were no forces in the town to prevent the boers from driving in and taking it. Their G5s and G6s were shelling an empty town. However, the situation soon changed, when a crack FAPLA brigade was assembled and escorted under a Cuban air umbrella and armoured vehicle support into the town.

At the same time, by the first week in December 15 to 20,000 Cuban reinforcements crossed the Atlantic landing at Luanda and Benguela, while the major force landed at Namibe.

The battle for Cuito Cuanavale raged unbroken for over half a year from mid-November. A torrent of 20,000 shells rained down on the once thriving town, over this period. In addition, in January, February and twice in March, the racists launched major air-artillery-tank offensives to try and break the heroic town's defences, but all to no avail and at a huge loss in armour, equipment and personnel to themselves. With callous disregard for Angolan sovereignty PW, Pik, Malan and Vlok all went into Angola to raise the troops' morale, but by the time April came, the town was clearly impregnable. When Fidel began issuing medals for the defence of Cuito Cuanavale, the boers began to change their tune, claiming, in the words of Malan, that "taking Cuito Cuanavale was never an objective". Why then were thousands of men, tens of thousands of shells and scores of tanks trained for months on end on what they now describe as "a meaningless village", which is "weakly situated from a tactical point of view"? It is clear that this army - the big war machine of the boers - failed to take a dusty little African village in Angola.

They were defeated in battle. The combined forces of FAPLA and Cuban troops stopped "Operation Modular" in its tracks, with thousands of enemy troops trapped 40km outside Cuito Cuanavale - unable to advance on the town and unable to retreat the 300km back to their bases on the Namibian border. In the course of the battle for Cuito, not only were the racist forces prevented from taking their objective, but more importantly they were robbed of their air supremacy - formerly the trump card of their aggression in the region. As Comrade President Tambo so aptly observed, Cuito Cuanavale is for Africa what Stalingrad was for the Soviet Union during the Second World War.

AN HISTORIC TURNING POINT

However, the historic significance of the heroic defence of Cuito Cuanavale goes beyond the battle. Events subsequent to April 1988 bear eloquent testimony to Fidel Castro's great insight, when he noted at the Non-Aligned

Meeting in June that "the history of Africa will have to be written as before and after Cuito, Cuanavale".

Faced with the problem of extricating its forces from the surrounds of Cuito and unclear how exactly to proceed, Pretoria was thrown into a frenzy of panic in the face of new developments. Following the Angolan Government's initiatives proposing a quadripartite accord between RSA, PRA and the Republic of Cuba and SWAPO*, President DóS Santos, in an exercise of sovereignty, requested the Cuban forces to assist him to regain Angolan territory in the south. At the beginning of April, the combined forces of FAPLA, SWAPO and Cuban internationalists, started to advance towards the Angolan/Namibian border, reclaiming the Cunene Province from the boers and UNITA bandits. Far from this being "no mans land", as Chester Crocker and his cronies in Pretoria claim, it is Angolan territory which the government has, until now, been unable to defend. By the beginning of May, Pretoria was at the negotiating table. And for the first time, the racists came with serious intent. They had been forced to negotiate because they encountered a formidable combination of force in Angola, which they had never previously faced.

THE LESSONS ARE CLEAR :

As long as the pressure does not let up, the racists will be forced to negotiate in earnest. FAPLA is now recognised as a very capable fighting force. Ironically, it has achieved this status as a direct result of Pretoria's destabilisation policy against Angola, which has forced a developing "third world" country to acquire a highly sophisticated, battle tested defence force which is capable of using the world's most effective means of defence. Already the advance guard has reached the Ruacana Dam, over which the boers have held unchallenged control until very recently. This is a vital installation for the tens of thousands of racist occupation forces in northern Namibian, as it is their main source of water. (The SADF consumes 80% of the water supplied into northern Namibia by the Ruacana dam.) When racist troops tried to prevent the advance, as happened north-west of the dam, they were unhesitatingly dealt with in a decisive manner - at least twelve white SADF soldiers were killed. The course of the negotiations are going to be rough. Pretoria is there very reluctantly and the USA has

* It also proposed a timetable for the gradual withdrawal of Cuban forces on condition that the UN Security Council Resolution 435/78 is implemented and that both SA and the USA cease support for UNITA.

its own agenda, as we see in its unflagging support for UNITA which it is trying to now instal in Zaire as its own surrogate force. Nevertheless, force of necessity appears to be compelling the boers to be serious. They have suffered a "humiliating defeat" (even in the views of Treurnicht) on the battlefield in Angola which is leading to a crisis of enormous dimensions. We are only now beginning to discern its real extent. Even the "Kerkbode" - the publication of the white Dutch Reformed Church - now questions the correctness of letting their youth die on Angolan soil. We must study and respond to developments very closely. We see the boers will negotiate when they are compelled by an overwhelming force - a revolutionary army - which can match them blow for blow.

October promises to herald struggles as profound as the 1984-7 township uprisings with Pretoria foisting ghetto elections on our people. Developments in the racists' debacle in Namibia and Angola open up unprecedented horizons with tremendous effect on our people's morale, to further raise the level of national resistance.

END

APARTHEID BAROMETER

SADF DEATHS

Between September 1987 and July 4 1988 the South African Defence Force listed the deaths of 83 SADF and South West Africa Territorial Force members. Of these, 70 occurring in Angola and the other 13 in the "operational area" (which includes southern Angola). A further two have been listed as "missing" and one as having been captured.

The 83 include 67 SADF and 16 SWATF soldiers. The SADF members, all of them white and none of them belonging to the "special forces", are believed to include 53 conscripts and 14 members of the Permanent Force. Forty-one were either officers or non-commissioned officers.

Weekly Mail, July 22 to July 28, 1988