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THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF REGIONAL CONFLICT - THE CASE OF ANGOLA

There are indications that the remainder of 1987 will continue the pattern of confrontation in the Angolan civil war that started at the end of 1975. The struggle for supremacy between the ruling MPLA and their political rival, UNITA, is likely to continue. After more than a decade of conflict, resolution should by now have shifted towards diplomatic negotiations, in view of the severe strain on human and monetary resources that the war places on the antagonists. Angolan sources indicate that 60 000 people have been killed, three-quarters of a million people have been displaced, and damage to property has been estimated at US\$ 12 billion. Over and above this is the inestimable damage to the Angolan economy.

The evidence suggests that the escalation of conflict has been fuelled by foreign support to both sides. The diplomatic-political initiative now being sought by the Angolan government has international repercussions, with at least five other countries involved. According to reports, the Soviet Union has channelled more than US\$ 4 billion into direct military support for the MPLA since 1976, while the United States, for the second year, has committed at least US\$ 15 million in covert aid to UNITA. No figures are available on the level of South African support to UNITA, in terms of personnel and materials, though indications are that this aid is substantial. Their support illustrates the level of superpower - and regional 'superpower' - involvement in the region, and highlights the international dimension of the conflict.

Possibly the most important issue of the Angolan crisis is that of human resources and financial loss within a military context. The number of foreign troops in Angola and the linkage issue have become contentious since South Africa agreed (at least in principle), to the implementation of UN Resolution 435 as the basis for solving the constitutional deadlock in SWA/Namibia. Cuba retains an estimated 35 000 to 37 000 troops in Angola, despite rumours of their replacement by North Koreans, in terms of an earlier defence agreement. Diplomatic sources suggest that it would be difficult to oust the Cubans because of the foreign currency they earn. Jonas Savimbi of UNITA has alleged that it costs the MPLA US\$ 1 000 for each Cuban soldier every month, amounting to a total of US\$ 480 million. Angolan President Eduardo dos Santos consistently denies that any payment has taken place since 1984. There may be doubt as to the exact sum, yet reliable sources confirm that such payment occurs on a regular basis.

US involvement in Angola - a diplomatic solution?

Recent diplomatic activity in Angola reflects the interests of the Reagan Administration, which badly needs a foreign policy success in Africa, particularly in Southern Africa. This has resulted in some unexpected economic problems for President Dos Santos. With the SWA/Namibia issue so closely linked to that of the Cuban presence in Angola, the interested parties may well be involved in serious behind-the-scenes diplomatic talks. Parties directly affected are Angola, Cuba, South Africa, the United States, SWAPO and UNITA. Reputedly, both the United Kingdom and West Germany are acting as 'brokers'. Recent reports suggest that a withdrawal of Cuban troops to the north of the thirteenth

parallel could be one way out of this complex diplomatic stalemate. That this initiative has been rejected by South African Defence Minister Magnus Malan, which, coupled with Luanda's negative view, does not eliminate the possibility of negotiation, since both parties may soon find themselves unable to sustain the costly Angolan conflict.

The United States has informed the Angolan government that it acknowledges UNITA as a legitimate guerrilla movement and will therefore continue to supply it with sophisticated equipment such as the STINGER surface-to-air missiles. Such assistance has resulted in UNITA claims of downing three jets in Huambo province, a strategic area under Cuban protection. The US decision to renew its aid to UNITA has definite diplomatic and military consequences for the MPLA, and in the case of the latter may prove to be an insupportable financial burden, which may be a factor in Angola's decision to consider a negotiated settlement. It does suggest that the US is less inclined to recognise an MPLA government in Angola than before.

The Reagan Administration seems to have committed itself to the region, especially as Angola plays a pivotal role in the resolution of the Namibian problem. However, whether US priorities will remain the same after the 1988 Presidential election remains to be seen. US-Zairean relations have featured prominently with reports that the US will be allowed to use the Kamina air base close to the Angolan border, in return for modernising the facilities. This is substantiated by claims that Zairean President Mobutu asked for US\$ 20 million for the renovation of Kamina when he visited Washington DC in 1986. Not only would the US gain its first inland base in Africa, but its central position would give the US a strategic advantage within striking distance of a hostile Libya and an unstable Southern Africa, and a stronger bargaining position in any future negotiations. Joint US-Zairean military exercises in early 1987 were centred on the Kamina region, an area where UNITA has important command posts.

UNITA and the South African connection

Although the US provides substantial aid, South Africa is generally regarded as UNITA's largest single supporter. Many publications have described UNITA as a 'surrogate force' of the South African Defence Force (SADF). While there is no doubt that South Africa provides UNITA with military hardware, it also becomes directly involved in military operations. UNITA is obviously a very useful tool to the SADF. The Angolan government's FAPLA troops have co-opted large numbers of SWAPO (PLAN) fighters in their struggle against UNITA - partly as a 'quid pro quo' for accommodating them on Angolan soil - which gives the SADF sufficient excuse to strike into Angolan territory. Frequent assertions by Angolan officials that the South West African Territory Force (SWATF) and SADF actions are primarily directed at Angolan targets may therefore have some substance. The SADF objective appears to be aimed as much at destroying MPLA/Cuban power bases as at bringing UNITA to power in Angola.

South Africa is an unpredictable actor in this situation because its policies are largely unco-ordinated. In 1984, with the signing of the Lusaka Agreement, South Africa's stated goal was simply to remove SWAPO as a military presence in Namibia. In 1987, Angola plays a key role in the international drive to isolate South Africa. The potential the Benguella railway offers South Africa's neighbouring states for rerouting freight would help to alleviate some of South Africa's economic stranglehold on the region. Currently the railway is still unreliable because of the conflict. In preparation for major offensives during the dry season, Cuban-backed strikes against UNITA appear to have increased since 26 March, when UNITA issued a statement in which it offered not to attack the strategically important railway line, subject to certain conditions - and despite reported pressure from fellow Frontline States asking Angola to consider UNITA's offer. Apart from UNITA's implied control of the railway line, the Angolan refusal to accept even this limited truce is in line with the MPLA's policy not to have any public or direct dealings with UNITA. How far South Africa features as a participant in possible secret talks is a matter for conjecture, but clearly it will be on the agenda as one of the aggressors.

Benguella - political strategy or diplomatic pragmatism?

After recent visits to Angola by US Asst-Secretary of State, Dr Chester Crocker, reports seem to indicate that negotiations centre on the withdrawal of Cuban troops to the

thirteenth parallel and a phased reduction of overall Cuban strength, which would result in total MPLA control of the railway line. This would enhance the chances of a successful implementation of a total trade embargo against South Africa by the Frontline States. It would also result in increased Angolan revenue.

The twelve-year-old conflict has taken its toll on the Angolan economy - the government's negotiations with the IMF are proof of this. The rescheduling of US\$ 4 billion in foreign debt, as well as reported Western aid to Angola, indicate new initiatives by the Angolans to minimise their economic vulnerability. President Dos Santos obviously sought both economic and diplomatic support on his recent European tour. He achieved moderate success in France, which has pledged diplomatic support for Angola's negotiations with the IMF. France has supplied Angola with helicopter gunships and development aid. Portugal might also give Angola a certain amount of diplomatic support. The economic factor forces the Angolan government to be more flexible towards Western demands, especially on the thorny Cuban issue.

Earlier this year UNITA used the Benguela issue in attempts to gain recognition as a 'genuine' liberation movement. They made it clear that political change in Angola was their primary motivation, rather than the furthering of South African goals. UNITA's political offensive was aimed at exploiting the Angolan government's economic problems, ward off the forecast military offensive before the rainy season. However, the Cuban/Soviet military commitments have hampered the Angolan government. A pre-emptive military strategy, denying UNITA control of the railway line, would seem to be the preferred option, reducing UNITA's bargaining powers.

US-Angolan and US-South African diplomacy has meanwhile been clouded, to say the least, by military aggression between the MPLA (FAPLA) and UNITA fighters and evidence of South African involvement will have complicated the diplomatic process even further. The US Asst-Secretary of State, Dr Crocker, has apparently tried to convince the Angolan government that it could not crush a South African-backed UNITA. Angolan delays in continuing the offensive against UNITA do suggest that some negotiations are taking place, in the light of the recent Albertini-De Jorge-Du Toit and FAPLA prisoners-of-war exchange.

International and regional dimensions of intensified diplomatic, military and political activity

While this paper suggests that increasing contact at a diplomatic level is taking place, it does not imply that military and political conflict has abated. Rather, recent developments indicate that the conflict is escalating, involving a number of countries on the issues of Angola and Namibia. The problems that remain unresolved are South African control over Namibia, and the presence of Cuban troops in Angola. However, one could say that the diplomatic initiative has broadened, with the Angolan issue featuring even at US-Soviet pre-summit talks. Clearly, the UNITA and SWAPO guerrilla movements would have to be part of any negotiated settlement, even though SWAPO's military activity has decreased considerably. SWAPO's political significance is more important than their military capability - a factor the South African government must consider in relation to any political solution to the Namibian issue.

West European and Eastern bloc countries are involved, either on a diplomatic or a military level. This East-West involvement, at a time when FAPLA troops and Cuban fighters have intensified their struggle to eliminate UNITA forces, emphasises the instability of the region. Recent reports of South African involvement cannot be taken lightly.

The prevailing instability could result in further violence, which could undermine further peace initiatives. With so many countries involved, the entire region is in a state of flux. Yet there are hopeful indications that the conflict is moving towards a diplomatic settlement, rather than towards more armed conflict. Clearly, with superpowers and other major countries involved, a possible East-West diplomatic confrontation has to be delicately manoeuvred around, as larger issues are at stake, beyond mere resolution of the sub-continent's problems.

The Angolan crisis has not quite reached international proportions as yet, even though more countries are increasingly involved. South Africa's domestic situation and the

international outcry against apartheid threatens to push the intricate Angolan/Namibian problem into the full glare of the international spotlight. Punitive economic sanctions against South Africa hinge on the asymmetrical interdependence of South Africa and its neighbours. Apart from the manifold complexities of the Angolan conflict, the issue is exacerbated by the East-West dimension. Contradictory US policy concerning Angola may have prompted more aggressive military involvement by the socialist interests in Angola.

Against this background, transnational corporations may play a very crucial role in helping to resolve the regional stalemate. The British corporation Lonrho PLC has considerable regional interests. The Belgian firm Soci t  Generale de Belgique SA has strong ties to Zaire and the Benguela line. Other giant corporations such as Texaco and Chevron have been pressured by the US government to withdraw at least partially and would therefore almost certainly agitate for a peaceful settlement in the region. Cumulative pressure from the international corporate sector may help to bring about active diplomatic initiatives, a process which Angola must surely welcome in view of its desperate economic situation.

Angola: Prospects in the light of international involvement

In the final analysis, opinion both at home and abroad may pressure the Reagan Administration into initiating formal negotiations on the linkage issue. Realistically, Angola, in the face of its mounting war debts and almost total economic destruction, must favour a swift settlement of the conflict, which includes the problem of Namibia. South Africa remains a crucial factor in any diplomatic resolutions for the sub-continent. International pressure, especially with regard to Namibia's independence, may yet bring it to the negotiating table. However, South African government statements that South Africa and the Soviet Union are the primary actors in Africa would seem to indicate their sense of power, as well as their obsession with socialist forces.

A peaceful end to the conflict in Angola is desired by all parties, but can only be brought about by a reconciliation of political and economic interests. Evidently, the USSR believes that an extension of its sphere of influence would be easier to achieve with a negotiated peace in Angola. That this reconciliatory approach would favourably influence future talks on strategic arms limitations in Europe, currently high on the Soviet agenda because of domestic problems, is patently clear.

That international involvement is essential to end the conflict is also evident. The security needs of both Angola and South Africa have to be considered, however. Whether Angola could eliminate UNITA as an opponent without coming to an agreement with South Africa is questionable. Angola will not succeed in defeating UNITA as long as it continues to disregard UNITA's legitimacy or chooses to exclude UNITA from future negotiations for a peaceful settlement. UNITA's South African backing is a complicating factor. Present military action in Angola suggests that possible behind-the-scenes negotiations have failed because of South Africa's insistence that UNITA be included in regional peace initiatives.

Angola's only other alternative is a massive final effort to eradicate UNITA as a politico-military force. While a military victory might have certain advantages for the MPLA in the short-term, negotiations for peace are almost a prerequisite to an internationally accepted settlement in Namibia, and to bring about an end to the civil war that is destroying Angola. Options and prospects for negotiation are restricted, the primary reason being that the Angolan crisis is becoming increasingly internationalised. Finally, it would seem that only an internationally brokered agreement holds any real hope for finding a solution acceptable to all sides and so ensure lasting stability in the region.

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