

Angola: Between War and Stalemate – Again?

Angola's armies are on the march once more. The long awaited Angolan Army (FAA) offensive against UNITA on the Central Plains ('Planalto') commenced on 14 September, with the activation of three fronts from the cities of Huambo, Cuito and Malanje. What are the prospects of a FAA military victory – and for peace?

Rearming both Sides

FAA has been under considerable political pressure to mount a counter-offensive to return the gains made by UNITA over the past 12 months. To this end, the 30,000-strong armed forces have been re-equipped, and additional recruits sought to bolster returnees from Congo Brazzaville.

Eight Sukhoi Su-27 aircraft were delivered to the Angolan Air Force (FANA) at its main base at Catumbela the beginning of August, and another seven are believed to be in the pipeline. Angolan pilots have returned from a conversion course in Belarus, and Ukrainians are apparently providing back-up support. To reinforce FANA, an additional number of MiG-23 fighter aircraft were assembled in Luanda from where they were deployed to Catumbela at the end of September. Other sophisticated equipment procured for the fight against UNITA include three-dimensional radar, Beechcraft King Air surveillance aircraft, and 70 new T-54 and T-72 tanks complete with reactive armour and advanced laser target acquisition systems.

General **Antonio Neto**, the chief procurement officer for the Angolan Army, reportedly visited Switzerland during the second week of September 1999, when a large number of military vehicles were apparently purchased.

Since the start of September, a total of 30 new BM-21 multiple rocket-launchers have been delivered to Luanda, and subsequently deployed to the front. The newly-procured 1-L117 three dimensional radar systems at the airports at Luanda, Catumbela, Cuito/Bie, and Huambo are now fully operational.

Critical Phase

The war in Angola is entering a critical phase.

The Angolan government appears determined to destroy UNITA militarily and is currently fighting on several fronts against UNITA-held areas. In order to counter these FAA actions, UNITA is currently raising their military profile by a series of redeployments and repositioning of some of its units.

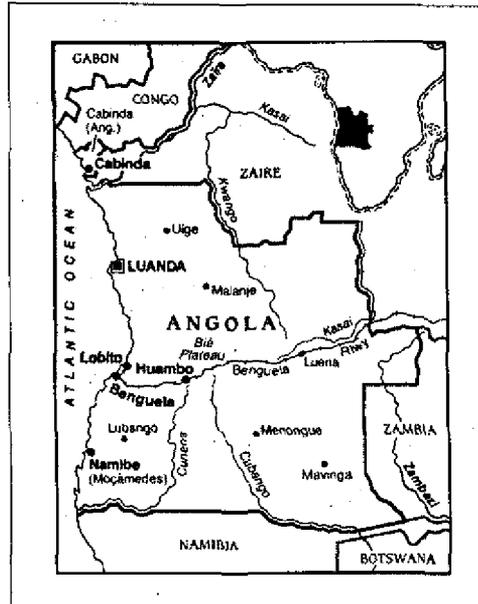
Very little information on the situation at the front is reaching the outside world, giving rise to intense speculation. Conflicting reports on military successes by both FAA and UNITA have surfaced. Following earlier, failed efforts by government forces to capture the key UNITA positions of Bailundo and Andulo, the military are now under strict orders from Luanda to maintain silence on the current offensive until such time the objective has been realised. The apparent reason for this is to enable Luanda, should it fail, to pretend the offensive never happened.

FAA commenced its offensive by intense aerial bombardments against UNITA positions at Bailundo, Andulo, Mussende and other known deployment areas. The airbases at Catumbela and Lubango are being used by

the Angolan Air Force to stage these attacks. The current tactic is to destroy all possible resistance from the sky, followed by FAA ground forces moving in.

Three Initial Fronts

Following the series of air attacks, the FAA offensive commenced towards the UNITA stronghold on the Central Plateau on the three aforementioned fronts from the cities of Huambo, Cuito and Malanje.



The advance south from Malanje was initially impeded by the Cuanza River, as the bridge across the river had earlier been destroyed by UNITA. These FAA units are currently deployed south-east of *Mussende following intense fighting* for control of the town which FAA succeeded in capturing. According to available information, UNITA has since evicted the government troops.

The advance from Huambo got bogged down at Bailundo where UNITA provided fierce resistance with a well-devised defensive network. UNITA has been able to maintain control over the town. This has led to a *revision of the initial FAA military plan*, withdrawing its forces from Bailundo and instead continuing the advance towards Andulo. This force is currently deployed at Mungo, awaiting reinforcements.

The advance north from Cuito is currently involved in heavy fighting with UNITA units at Cunhinga, 30 km north of Cuito/Bie.

There is currently a FAA force of approximately 6,000 men deployed in defensive positions next to the road between Huambo and Bie. This group was on its way to reinforce the FAA units at Cunhinga. The advance to Cuito/Bie is held up by a series of minefields deployed by UNITA on this road. The heavy rains are also impacting negatively on progress as FAA has had to move parallel to the roads due to UNITA mine-laying actions.

FAA has, however, succeeded in forcing UNITA's artillery back and out of range of some of the government-held cities such as Malanje, Huambo and Cuito/Bie ending, in the process, the continuous bombardment of these positions by UNITA. It has led to a marginal improvement of the situation in Malanje as some supplies and commodities from Luanda have found their way into the city. In Cuito/Bie, the airport has been closed to civilian aircraft to allow for a high frequency of military cargo planes flying in logistical support for FAA.

Smaller FAA operations are also being launched in the Uige, Huila and Moxico Provinces.

UNITA has, meanwhile, responded by redeploying their guerrilla units towards areas of strategic and economic importance to government.

A UNITA special forces group has been deployed towards Soyo, Angola's only on-shore oil installation. Over past week, attacks have been carried out on oil workers south of Soyo. UNITA elements infiltrated towards Luanda have also been active, ambushing convoys between Luanda at Quifangondo and Caxito. Sightings of armed UNITA patrols have also been reported. A group of approximately 60 well-equipped and trained UNITA commandos is

presently active in the Cuango River Valley. Over the past week, a series of organised attacks took place in the area of Luzamba. Should the threat against Andulo and, to a lesser extent, Bailundo, increase, UNITA attacks against Luanda, Soyo and the diamond-producing areas can be expected.

UNITA has also embarked on a campaign of destroying key bridges on FAA logistical supply routes. This has placed pressure on the Angolan Air Force and the air transport squadron flying Il-76s to resupply FAA units. Indeed, continued guerrilla actions by UNITA indicate that the war would not be won should FAA capture Andulo and Bailundo.

The Implications of War

The current offensive will have three major consequences:

First, the recent government gains are likely to have given encouragement to President **José Eduardo dos Santos** and other hard-liners who favour a 'no-negotiation/total war' strategy and seek to 'break UNITA's back'.

But, second, related to the above, no overall military victory is likely.

UNITA have had considerable time to prepare their defences in depth to interdict the limited attack routes on the Planalto. *There is, moreover, considerable resistance among the army elite and civil society to the renewed government offensive.* This is evident in the difficulty that the government has had in trying to recruit among Angola's youth.

Additionally, UNITA has succeeded in purchasing high technology anti-tank guided missile systems – the so-called 'Konkurs-M'. This weapon is said to be very effective against any reactive armour and will be integrated into UNITA's existing 'Tank Hunt Regiments'. The abilities of **Jonas Savimbi's** rebels to absorb losses and take the fighting into urban centres has been bloodily proven many times in the past. The commencement of the rainy season is also affecting FAA negatively, while favouring UNITA's mobile guerrilla tactics.

Third, the consequences of the renewed fighting for a country which has nearly two million internally-displaced people, are likely to be devastating.

The government's military strategy has involved the use of saturation air bombardments, including the use of napalm, cluster, phosphorous and fuel-air bombs. Recent developments have seen the withdrawal of 'non-essential' UN and Non-Governmental Organisation staff from the besieged cities of Huambo and Cuito/Bie as a result of continuing UNITA shelling. There has been a

significant rise in the number of refugees fleeing the fighting in the rural areas, especially around Uige, Negage and Sanza Pombo in the north, Malanje and Saurimo, as well as expected food shortages. And because of the fighting no preparation or cultivation of the land could be done prior to the commencing of the rainy season.

Angola is already one of the world's forgotten conflicts, scarcely meriting any attention in the global community despite having cost an estimated one million lives (from a population of just over 11 million) in the last three decades.

With a per capita income of US\$260 in 1997 ranking it 193 of 209 countries, Angola is faced with enormous developmental challenges. Just 32% of the population have access to safe water, life expectancy at birth is 46 years, and the infant mortality rate is 125 per 1,000 live births. Annual income has declined by 10% annually since 1990. Yet since 1992, the MPLA and UNITA have each squandered an estimated US\$3-4 billion of their respective oil and diamond revenues on arms.

A Failure of Peace?

A failure on the part of the international community to urge and pressurise both sides to negotiate rather than fight it out, is a failure for the cause of peace.

The accepted policy wisdom in the international community is to isolate UNITA through the imposition of sanctions on the grounds that the MPLA is the legitimate government and the aggrieved party, and that Savimbi cannot be trusted. By doing so, however, this merely encourages Luanda to seek an unattainable military solution — at great cost to the civilian population and great profit to the belligerents.

Warming Relations with the US?

Far from pressurising the sides to the negotiating table, senior Angolan and US officials inaugurated the Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC) with talks on 30 September and 1 October. The aim of these talks was to initiate a new era of 'co-operation and consultation' between the two countries.

The talks covered all major issues in the bilateral relationship, including expanding of trade and investment, US support for Angola's economic and financial stabilisation and reform programs, co-

operation and co-ordination on regional issues, and US assistance to address urgent humanitarian needs. The meetings included discussions on how to more effectively enforce UN sanctions against UNITA, continue the peace and reconciliation process, identify the means to further promote human rights, combat terrorism, crime and narcotics trafficking, and promote co-operation between Angola and its neighbours.

Washington has allegedly granted Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI) — a military-training outfit — an operating licence in Angola. They will apparently facilitate the retraining of some FAA officers, reorganisation of FAA structures, training of police units, etc. This initiative is seen to be a direct result of improved bilateral relations between Luanda and Washington. However, the deployment of MPRI personnel to Angola is apparently presently hampered by a delay in payment by Luanda given the allocation of funds to the procurement of arms and equipment.

What are SA's Options?

What should SA do, given that it already has such a full agenda in Southern Africa in creating a peace to keep in the Congo and in maintaining common direction and cohesion in the Southern African Development Community (SADC)? Moreover, there appears to be personal bad blood between Presidents Dos Santos and **Thabo Mbeki**. Luanda is apparently suspicious about the apparently close relationship between the ANC and the former Angolan Prime Minister and MPLA Secretary-General **Lopo do Nascimento**.

South and Southern Africa would benefit enormously if peace was to prevail in Angola. Its wealth and potential combined with massive infrastructure needs offer huge business opportunities.

Pretoria is faced with a peculiar challenge in that the MPLA government fears the message sent out by the success of South Africa's transition: that negotiation can produce results. Neither the hard-liners in the ruling MPLA or UNITA are in the business of compromise given the extreme degree of suspicion and hostility. Yet Pretoria has to adopt a strategy that promotes common ground between the protagonists and moderation in Angola, without which the military men will continue to shape events.

Put simply, advancing the cause of peace will demand dealing with both sides.