



**Institute for Security Studies**  
**Institut d'Etudes de Sécurité**

Knowledge empowers Africa • Le savoir émancipe l'Afrique

## **ANGOLA - At the Precipice**

*Jakkie Potgieter & Richard Cornwell, OASIS Programme, Institute for Security Studies*

Occasional Paper No 32 -July 1998

---

In April this year, the Institute for Security studies published a paper entitled *Angola: Endgame or Stalemate?* in which the deterioration of the security situation in Angola was analysed. A number of possible scenarios were suggested, based upon the analysis. This paper aims to provide a set of updated and upgraded scenarios based upon developments since the publication of the previous paper.

The death of Alioune Blondin Beye, the United Nations Special Envoy to Angola, in an air crash in the Côte d'Ivoire on 27 June, brought five years of unstinting efforts to save the Lusaka Peace Accords to an untimely end. Press speculation that his departure from the scene might deal a fatal blow to the peace, however, was mistaken. Tragically, as Maître Beye himself was only too aware, events and decisions beyond his control or influence were hurrying Angola towards catastrophe. Indeed, at the time of his death, Beye was making a last attempt to induce the governments of two countries regarded as close to Unita's Dr Savimbi - Togo and the Côte d'Ivoire - to press him to make those concessions necessary to preserve the peace. Only the previous day he had met Savimbi, who had told him that UNITA would not be meeting the UN deadline to hand over the control of the territory in the Central Highlands to the authorities in Luanda, despite the threat of wider UN sanctions.

As noted in the earlier paper, Savimbi knew that if he could avoid war and retain control of a significant part of Angola's diamond wealth, the passage of time would tend to damage the position and cohesion of the authorities in Luanda. The fall in the oil price has seriously affected the Angolan economy, even though only a portion of that revenue finds its way into public accounts. Although vast and exciting discoveries are now being made in the deep waters off the Angolan coast, exploration world-wide is now outstripping demand and, barring a major conflict in the Middle East, the global oil price is likely to remain depressed for the foreseeable future. The recent economic downturn in the Far East and Southeast Asia merely reinforces this tendency. At the end of May, a team from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) recorded its concern about Angola's growing balance of payments deficit, a distorted exchange rate, which sees the kwanza massively overvalued, and a lack of transparency in accounting for oil revenues. Angola currently produces some 750 000 barrels of oil a day, but only half of the state's income from oil is reflected in the national budget.

Over the past five years, the Angolan government has negotiated expensive short term commercial loans to cover a widening budget deficit, and now owes some US \$10 billion. Even if the Angolan government were to negotiate a programme with the IMF - a decision likely to worsen the divisions within its own ranks - it is unlikely that this would significantly reduce the debt burden, since most of Angola's creditors fall outside the financial mainstream. Given the difficult financial position in which the Luanda government finds itself, it is quite possible that the decision to return to the battlefield may be motivated partly by the desperate need to secure access to Angola's inland wealth - particularly diamonds.

Public sector salaries, including those to the armed forces, have yet to be paid this year, with the exception of monies owed to troops and police occupying areas held until recently by UNITA. In consequence, many security personnel engage in acts of looting and robbery,

which are then credibly ascribed to bandits or to UNITA, who themselves indulge in similar practices. The socio-economic situation in Luanda has passed beyond dire, and it is unclear whether the recent deployment of troops and police in the capital has more to do with the impending return to hostilities than with the anticipation of popular unrest. The city's infrastructure, originally intended to provide rudimentary services to some 300 000 people, has now collapsed under the pressure of a population ten times that number, most of them refugees from the conflict in the interior.

On 23 June, Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General, delivered his own report on the status of the peace process to the Security Council. He noted that, Beye's efforts notwithstanding, no progress had been achieved in normalising state administration throughout the country, especially in the strategic area around Andulo, Bailundo, Mungo and N'Harea, which remained firmly under UNITA control despite undertakings that these towns would be returned to government authority by 1 April. UNITA subsequently moved to oust or challenge state administration in a number of other localities. An emergency plan, suggested by Beye, was agreed to on 19 May. This provided for the normalisation of administration in the Central Highlands, the verification of armed forces still under UNITA command, the cessation of hostile propaganda in the state-controlled media and of police harassment of UNITA supporters. A week later, Savimbi suggested amendments and conditions, but promised to permit the return of state administration by 25 June. This deadline was later extended to 30 June by the Security Council, but on 1 July, in the absence of a favourable response from UNITA, additional sanctions were imposed upon the movement.

Experience suggests that the new sanctions, which include the freezing of bank accounts held by UNITA's leaders, and a ban on trading in diamonds from UNITA-held territory, are unlikely to have much effect. Earlier attempts to close UNITA's overseas offices were easily circumvented, and the ban on flights into UNITA-held territory has been violated virtually at will, by aircraft registered in several African and European countries, including Russia and the Ukraine. As a result, UNITA has been able to supply and restock the six battalions it has in place in the Andulo-Bailundo sector, and has also resuscitated its old headquarters at Jamba in the south-east.

As argued in the earlier paper, UNITA has dribbled out strategically insignificant concessions in an attempt to deny Luanda the excuse for launching an all-out military assault until recently. It has also attempted to convince the international community of serious flaws in the implementation of the peace accords, which it has blamed principally on the government, but also on the weakness and partiality of the UN monitoring operation. In particular, UNITA sought to focus attention on the government's failure to disarm the civilian population and, lately, on atrocities committed against its supporters in areas returned to Luanda's administrative control. In its memorandum of 8 May, UNITA also required that the UN issues a statement about arrangements for a second round of presidential elections, a clear indication of the direction in which Savimbi seeks satisfaction.

Recent deployments of UNITA forces, however, suggest that Savimbi has few illusions about his ability to dissuade or restrain Luanda's generals in their determination to seek a military solution to the political impasse. All indications are that the 'hawks' have won their argument with President dos Santos, and that a return to full-scale hostilities is imminent. The President will attempt to retain tight control of operations, but this may prove difficult once battle is joined. The Luanda propaganda machine has gone into gear to prepare the general public for a resumption of the war. Both sides have recommenced the compulsory recruitment of youths and young men to augment the forces already available. Over the last two months, General João de Matos, the Angolan Chief of Staff, has made a tour of his front-line units - in itself an indication of preparations for war - and the contracts of some 250 foreign military advisors to the *Forças Armadas Angolanas* (FAA) have been extended to the end of the year. These advisors - many of them allegedly South Africans - may prove essential in assisting the FAA to overcome its shortcomings in air support, logistical organisation, intelligence gathering and mobile combined-arms operations. Recent indications are that the FAA special forces at Cabo Ledo and Catumbela, and the strike squadrons of the air force are already at a high level of readiness. The infantry and armour formations deployed in the Huambo and Saurimo areas also seem poised to move against Andulo, Bailundo and the Lundas. Even so, it is far

from a foregone conclusion that the FAA possesses the wherewithal to deal UNITA a fatal blow during this dry season. Should it fail to do so, however, UNITA's position would be strengthened in any subsequent renegotiation of the 'peace'.

There are a number of questions about the state of the FAA forces. Only those units moved into territory previously held by UNITA have been paid since December. Other troops have been reduced to looting and cattle-rustling to sustain themselves. Discipline has been a problem in some units. Few FAA formations have any experience of mobile offensive operations. The most formidable of these is the 16th Brigade, apparently now in Luena, whence it can hardly have a direct effect on operations aimed at Bailundo and Andulo. Indeed, there are indications that UNITA is moving a force into place to mask Luena from the anticipated battlefield. A body of some 5 000 UNITA troops has also been reported near Menongue. This force seems to have been redeployed from Andulo and Bailundo, leading some observers to conclude - probably mistakenly - that UNITA is preparing to abandon its positions there. It is more likely that UNITA has positioned a guerrilla brigade where it can effectively control access to the south-east and, in the event of a retreat from the Central Highlands, provide a secure escape route. Menongue is the choke point on all the viable routes leading towards Jamba.

The terrain in the Central Highlands offers many advantages to a UNITA defence. Lines of advance will be easy to identify and observe, and the mountain defiles have undoubtedly been prepared for demolitions, and artillery targets registered. This region poses some unusual tactical problems for the attacking commander. Although the FAA has a monopoly of air power, it probably has insufficient equipment to make a decisive difference. On the ground, the FAA superiority in armour must be balanced against the nature of the terrain in which it will have to fight. The approaches to Bailundo and Andulo are enclosed. The high ground will be occupied by UNITA strongpoints and will channel an attacking force, restricting its mobility and exposing it to tank-hunting teams and guerrilla-style operations on their flanks and in the rear areas. This will effectively reduce tanks to acting as mobile pill-boxes and will commit infantry to protection tasks. The pre-registration of artillery targets on the few available approach routes may lead to severe losses among the attacking infantry and cause the assault to stall. The density of the bush often minimises arcs of fire and may make it impossible for tank gunners to engage at distances greater than 50-100 metres. The technical shortcomings of older Russian-built armour - their fire control systems, optical equipment, and restricted gun-elevation and traverse speeds - will exacerbate the FAA's difficulties. Doubts about the current serviceability of equipment and the FAA's ability to improve or sustain this also suggest an essential modification to the balance of military strength.

In short, a slow, and costly advance into the UNITA positions is anticipated, with a possibility of the FAA suffering a major reverse.

One of the scenarios suggested in April, needs to be revisited:

The government eventually loses patience with UNITA and launches an offensive, initially against 'armed bands', subsequently against UNITA bases and strongholds.

- *The government offensive is successful and UNITA's military capacity is effectively destroyed, leaving the militants no option but to make what they can out of a peace deal.*

The government forces seem poised to launch a major air attack supported by selective ground operations. They will probably concentrate initially on neutralising UNITA's principal communications and command centres by air - Bailundo, Andulo, N'Harea, Luzambo and Jamba - inflicting as much damage as possible to airstrips to restrict mobility or resupply. Motorised forces would then attempt to tie down UNITA forces in their defensive positions and prevent them from entering the fighting, resupplying or reinforcing. Simultaneously, FAA troops would attempt a systematic mobile area search-and-destroy operation into any UNITA-held territory of financial significance, locating and attempting to destroy residual forces. If the area operation were successful, this could take us to the end of the dry season, in which case remaining UNITA forces might be attacked in mobile offensive operations. In the event of a subsequent UNITA retreat, the FAA would try to channel them towards the less significant areas of the south-east. Luanda would then hope to follow up with the firm establishment of

state control and an intensive programme of social reconstruction. Isolated pockets of resistance in the south-east could then be cleared.

- *The government offensive bogs down, leading to a protracted struggle in which neither side is able to strike the decisive blow.*

Were UNITA able to retain control of the rural areas, it would be capable of continuing a guerrilla campaign that would deny government control and the use of the diamond wealth of the interior. Employing a mobile defence and guerrilla tactics, UNITA would attempt to wear down the physical and psychological capacity of the FAA, to the extent of rendering these forces impervious to threats from their commanders.

- *UNITA inflicts a decisive defeat upon the FAA and government control is relinquished over a number of areas, leading to a revision of the terms of the Lusaka Protocol.*

In any event, should the fighting recommence, the Lusaka Accords would be null and void. The international community would be unable to recognise a UNITA government, and would have to try and restore its local and continental credibility by mediating or accepting another negotiated settlement - including some recognition of a 'democratic process'. This might involve a second round of presidential elections, which Savimbi would then be in a position to arrange to his satisfaction. It is also possible that, in such an event, some measure of formal decentralisation might reduce tensions between apparently irreconcilable rivals - though the control of Angola's oil and diamond wealth remain an indivisible prize.

Common to all these scenarios, we believe the UN will withdraw its forces the moment serious fighting resumes. Preparations for this eventuality have been in place for some time now, with the erection of a reception camp outside Bloemfontein from which peacekeepers would be returned to their nations of origin. Even a much reduced UN presence is costing in the region of US \$11 million a month, a sum to be borne in mind by any other international body seeking to assume a similar role. Certainly, having withdrawn, the Security Council is unlikely to authorise a return to Angola until the war is decided in favour of one or another of the parties. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) may not be able to afford the luxury of delay. Pressure upon these bodies to intervene or mediate will be severe, possibly along the lines of a regional peacekeeping or peacemaking force such as the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in West Africa. This might similarly be stiffened by assistance from private military companies associated with the oil and diamond interests of which the exploitation of Angola's mineral wealth is threatened by the continuation of war. Even so, this task would probably be beyond the capacity of these organisations, even with substantial financial assistance, and the position they have adopted on the Angolan issue is hardly likely to recommend them to UNITA as impartial mediators.

In conclusion, whatever happens in Angola remains firmly in the hands of the protagonists. Whoever emerges as the winner, the ordinary people of Angola will remain what they have been for too much of their history - the ultimate losers.