

## Angola: What hope for an end to the war?

Fierce fighting has been reported near the besieged government-held city of Cuito in Angola as the Angolan armed forces (FAA) battle to oust the UNITA rebel movement from a nearby town. United Nations (UN) officials are reportedly concerned that the noose is being tightened around Cuito, now within shelling range of UNITA's artillery. The capital of Bie Province, Cuito lies in the central highlands some 500 kms southeast of the capital, Luanda, and provides refuge to an estimated 60,000 displaced people, a number which has doubled in the past month. Three questions arise: First, is any side winning? Second, how bad is the situation? Third, what are the prospects for peace?

### Current Events and Prospects

Diplomats and soldiers alike are not optimistic about the current turn of events. Speaking at the conference on *Peace Support Operations in Africa* co-staged by the SAIIA on 25 March 1999, Major-General **Philip Sibanda** of the Zimbabwe Defence Force and one-time commander of the UN's peacekeeping forces in Angola from 1995-98 (UNAVEM III) said that "there was no end in sight for the conflict". Other diplomats at the same event argued privately that just as in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) neither side has the capability to inflict defeat on the other; and that the military stalemate would probably continue as a result. Sibanda noted that the problems would remain so long as UNITA's Dr **Jonas Savimbi** "who is a brilliant man" was there as he only wanted to "play in the first XI, not the second XI" — in other words, he only wanted to be President.

Non-government analysts also see the war dragging on inexorably unless some sort of drastic military breakthrough (unlikely) is made by either side, or the sides agree on the terms to resume negotiations (equally unlikely).

The United States government, which favours a return to the Lusaka peace process as — in the words of a senior State Department official — "at least a starting point", is currently attempting to deepen its ties with Luanda. The visit by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, **Witney Schneidman**, to the Angolan capital in February was behind this move. According to Washington sources, it may

ultimately involve non-lethal arms transfers to the Angolan regime, including transport aircraft and air-defence weapons. While there are undoubtedly political considerations behind this thinking, clearly American concerns are motivated principally by the need to safeguard its oil imports and US investments in this area. Angola currently supplies around 7% of the US' oil import requirements. One factor until now not considered in this regard, is that Savimbi may be attempting to expand and then consolidate his operations prior to the possible installation of a Republican administration in the White House in 2000 which may be viewed as more accommodating to UNITA's position.

But the Lusaka process offers nothing new; and is rejected outright by UNITA. Buoyed by his recent military successes, Savimbi has made it clear that UNITA is fighting to induce the Angolan government to negotiate, but on new terms. He has argued that Angola can only be rebuilt on the basis of its cultural diversity. His willingness to re-engage in negotiations is itself a reason for cautious optimism. Support for this process would also have to come from UNITA Secretary-General **Paulo Lukamba 'Gato'** and Vice-President General **António Dembo** given their close relationship with Dr Savimbi.

In this regard, UNITA's political commission used the occasion of the 33rd anniversary of the movement to reaffirm its determination to implement its *Societal Project* as the cornerstone of the interest of "African Angolans" against the "misgovernment... and anachronistic neo-colonialism" of the MPLA. The Project strongly

recognises the peasant-based economy and needs of Angolans — a clear swipe at the European-minded Luandan elite. This reaffirmation of the Project and the fact that UNITA did not move its military forces rapidly into the diamond areas and Cabinda, seems to confirm that UNITA believes that negotiations are necessary and that no military solution is possible. (It will be interesting to note how a South African government under **Thabo Mbeki** reacts to this characterisation of the war as that between 'African' — UNITA — and 'Creole' — MPLA — factions given Mbeki's perceived Africanist leanings.)

It is unclear whether political/ ethnic/ ideological differences are at the heart of what is a very personal contest between Savimbi and President **José Eduardo dos Santos**, or whether these are indeed the excuse for a perpetuation of the conflict. The war allows, perversely, a perpetuation of a system where a lack of accountability, bad governance and no transparency are the order of the day. It permits Luanda's elite to skim money from arms transfers; and individuals within the MPLA and UNITA to gain from access to oil and diamond sales respectively.

But there is no doubt that the war is costing and hurting both sides, though probably the government more than UNITA. Luanda is believed to have bargained for cash-up-front sales on new oil concessions as a way to fund arms purchases. UNITA's advances on Cuito and Huambo suggest that it is intent on adding these cities to Cuinga, Cutato, Chinguar, Catabola, Mukaba, Mbanza Congo, Lucala, and Camacupa, all captured since January.

Cuito is now totally isolated, and ripe for UNITA's capture, though holding it could prove to be folly with limited gains and potentially large military costs to the rebels. But it will show government (and this could be UNITA's primary purpose) that it can up the ante if it chooses to. A similar strategy may be adopted with Huambo. However, the two offensives are currently tying up around 2,000 men (in the case of Cuito) and two motorised brigades (over 5,000 men in total) in Huambo.

UNITA's fighting power will have been reinforced if the rumours surrounding its acquisition of six MIG 21/23 fighters (piloted by South Africans and Ukrainians) located at the main UNITA logistical base at Likua, and four helicopters is true. While the lack of operational bases would seriously inhibit the deployment of the fixed-wing aircraft, the helicopters could perform a useful logistical and command-and-control function.

Current force level estimates put UNITA's fighting strength at between 20-30,000 combat ready troops. The Angolan government is believed to have as many as 100,000 personnel under arms. Yet many of them are, in the words

of one analyst, "cannon fodder", and their number of combat soldiers are probably substantially fewer than UNITA. Both sides are apparently using mercenaries, with reports of the involvement with UNITA of South African ex-Special Forces and Koevoet members, Moroccan infantrymen, Ukrainians, Serbians, as well as former Mobutuists and Hutu militia from the Congo. The use of former personnel from Executive Outcomes (EO) by UNITA apparently stems from Savimbi's offer to grant amnesty to any former EO soldier willing to fight with him against FAA.

At the same time, UNITA has been reorganised into six conventional regiments to take advantage of recent arms shipments: tank-hunter (with jeep-type mounted anti-tank missiles and recoilless rifles), air-to-air (with vehicle and shoulder-launched Stinger-type missiles, and guns), artillery (with rocket launchers as well as howitzers/guns), logistics, a 6,000-strong special forces outfit, and multiple special commando groups.

**"Angolan intelligence services have reportedly instigated a campaign against UNITA members in South Africa"**

To counter the advances made by UNITA in the field, the Angolan intelligence services have reportedly instigated a campaign against UNITA members in South Africa; and have stepped up activities elsewhere in the region. There

has been talk that the Angolans are planning an attack on the Ideni fuel depot at Ndola in Zambia to deprive UNITA of its primary source of supply. Any upset in UNITA's fuel supply-lines would severely impact on its operational capability. Moreover, it would send a blunt message to Lusaka to curb any support for the Angolan rebels, particularly coming so soon after the bomb blasts in the Zambian capital which, it is rumoured, were planted by Angolan agents.

The regional effect goes beyond SA and Zambia, however. **Laurent Kabila's** overtures in late-March to the Congolese rebel Rally for Democracy (RCD) movement can be explained by a diminution of Angolan support for the beleaguered Congo leader. In a less positive vein, Zambia's fuel depots also supply the DRC's southern mining towns of Kolwezi and Lubumbashi, and any disturbance of their flow would have serious implications for Congo's already shaky economy.

Kabila's problems do not end there, however. There are rumours also that a new rebel movement, closely allied to UNITA and the 'Kolelas' opposition movement in Congo-Brazzaville (which is in turn allied to former President **Pascal Lissouba** who was deposed by **Denis Sassou-Nguesso's** Angolan-supported force in 1997), is being formed in Bas Congo province of the DRC. Described as the 'Bakongo Movement', this group is apparently prepared to join with UNITA for an assault against Cabinda before moving eastward towards both Kinshasa and Brazzaville.

Although a key logistical resupply area, Zambia is also not the only supply-line for weapons reaching UNITA at its airbases in Angola at Andulo, Cazombo and Likua. Tanzania and Namibia have also been mentioned as trans-shipment areas for ammunition and small arms. Much of this is apparently sourced from Ukraine and North Korea, and the latter have also reputedly supplied the Frog 7(a) surface-to-surface missiles. Although a rudimentary missile with no in-flight command-and-control capability, with a range of 70kms it could be used by UNITA as a terror weapon against MPLA-controlled cities.

UNITA's position has also been strengthened in the region by a reportedly close working relationship with Prime Minister **Yoweri Museveni** of Uganda who has apparently sent one of his top generals to work with Savimbi. **John Garang**, the leader of the Ugandan-supported Sudanese People's Liberation Army, is also in this network. As one analyst recently argued: "The key node in this power equation is UNITA's Savimbi. He is the 'Power maker'. No pincer action can occur against Kinshasa, Brazzaville or Luanda without him. UNITA is the constant".

### What Now?

The Angolan Army is currently preparing a counter-offensive under Chief of Staff **João de Matos**. This is planned to take place in late-April or early-May with new equipment and fresh troops. Echoing the thoughts of his UNITA counterparts, Matos has said that a defeat of UNITA would be "very difficult...as the government is not equipped for this kind of war".

UNITA, meanwhile, will most likely consolidate its position on the Central Plateau — in Andulo, Bailundo, Nharea and Mussende, prior to making a military thrust into the provinces of Bengo and Luanda in an effort to reopen negotiations. If they are successful and UNITA threatens the capital either by sabotage or bombardment, the government and Luandese response could be similar to that of 1992 — including the deployment of civil militias and the manhunt of Ovimbundu and Bakongo in the city.

It is imperative for the international community to encourage cooler heads. South Africa, along with other like-minded members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) should, first, make it clear that it will not permit an incursion into Zambian territory. Second, that negotiations should be brokered immediately. If necessary, this should be under UN auspices. The Troika are now a largely discredited force given the warming US-Luanda ties, and Luanda's past and current links with Russia (which is rumoured to have re-equipped and trained Matos' new units) and Portugal. To ensure that this happens, South Africa will have to get, in the words of one analyst, "more nasty" with those in SADC (read Zimbabwe and Namibia) probably opposed to South African interference.

This will be a key test for the fledgling Mbeki government as it moves South Africa's foreign policy from high principles and prevarication to implementation. The impact of Angola's continuing crisis will be too severe on the region, let alone itself, to risk otherwise.