Civil war in Namibia

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Secessionist demands in Namibia have erupted into civil war. At the beginning of the month a hundred or so guerrillas of the Caprivi Liberation Army (CLA) attacked the police station, airport and a military base in Katima Mulilo, the regional capital of the Caprivi Strip in Namibia. Five policemen and three soldiers were killed, but Namibian troops were able to regain control of the region, killing five rebels.

Caprivi is a narrow 400 kilometre-long strip of land stretching from the Northeast of Namibia across to the Zambesi River, bounded by Angola and Zambia in the North and Botswana in the South.

The leader of the CLA, Mishake Muyongo, is in exile in Denmark where he is quoted as saying that the attack was "just the beginning" and that the "struggle will be long, it will get bigger and it will be victorious".

Last October, Muyongo, the CLA leaders and about 100 armed men fled into neighbouring Botswana after their training camp was discovered by the Namibian government. After a tough security clampdown, about 2,000 civilians fled over the border as well. They were granted refugee status, though many of them have since returned. The 15 leaders of the movement were given political asylum, but under protest from Namibia an agreement was made with the United Nations that they would be exiled to other countries—in Muyongo's case to Denmark.

In the 1980s Muyongo was a vice president of the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO)—the nationalist movement that fought for the independence of Namibia from South Africa. He was expelled over the Caprivi issue and became a leader of the opposition party, the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance, which was little more than a front for the South African apartheid regime. After an independence settlement was arranged between the Western governments and the Soviet Union, elections in 1990 brought SWAPO into government. Muyongo was made president of the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance, which has some support in Caprivi, but was then expelled last year, again for seeking secession.

The CLA's secessionist claims are based on the fact that the arbitrarily drawn borders of the Caprivi region cut through the Lozi-speaking area of Barotseland, a kingdom in pre-colonial times. There are Lozi speakers in neighbouring Botswana, Angola and Zambia. Muyongo has an alliance with Boniface Mafwe, who also fled to Botswana. He is an ex-chief of the Mafwe royal family, once the rulers of Barotseland. The Zambian part of Barotseland was an autonomous region that was incorporated into that country in 1964, following an agreement between the Barotse king and President Kenneth Kaunda. Before that Barotseland had been a cheap labour reserve, particularly for the mines of South Africa. A group of Lozi speakers in Zambia have formed the Barotse Patriotic Front and have pledged support for the CLA.

Any proposal for a separate Barotseland is clearly reactionary. A conflict over the Caprivi strip, whipped up by the clique around Muyongo, can hardly benefit the population of this impoverished region. "Self determination" for a tiny strip of land with a population of less than 100,000 can have no meaning other than Muyongo and his supporters making a separate deal with South African and Western backers to the 1990 arrangement with SWAPO.

As well as possibly spilling over into Zambia, the biggest danger of escalation comes from Angola. It is likely that the CLA—which apparently has little local support—is being funded and armed by the Angolan UNITA movement, engaged in fighting a civil war against the MPLA government. There is a long history of a relationship between the Caprivi strip and UNITA. Before 1990 the strip was a militarised zone controlled by the South African apartheid regime, used as both a base of operations against SWAPO and to supply

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UNITA in Angola. It is likely that UNITA still gets supplies this way from its business backers who still operate with impunity in South Africa.

Whether the civil war escalates in Namibia depends on whether UNITA wishes merely to warn the Namibian regime against giving military as well as verbal support to the MPLA government, or whether it wants to move into Namibia to further escalate the conflict with the MPLA. Namibian armed forces are said to be ill equipped for such a civil war.

Like the whole patchwork quilt of borders in Africa, the existence of the Caprivi strip has no rational justification. It is a relic from when the imperialist powers divided up the continent at the end of the last century. At the 1890 Berlin Conference, Britain gave the strip of land, part of what was then the Bechuanaland protectorate (now Botswana), together with the North Sea island of Heligoland to Germany. They received the spice islands of Zanzibar in exchange. The Germans wanted the land to connect their colony of South West Africa (now Namibia) with the Zambesi, which they saw as a potential trade route. These plans came to nothing—the Victoria Falls block the route from that part of the Zambesi to the sea.

Since taking power the SWAPO leadership has abandoned all traces of its former socialist rhetoric and has been praised in South Africa for its embrace of the global economy. Dependent on substantial earnings from diamonds, uranium, copper and gold, Namibia has an annual income per capita of $3,700, considerably higher than many African countries, and has only a small foreign debt. There is a growing polarisation of wealth, however, with 39 percent of the population living below the poverty line. The Caprivi population has one of the lowest annual per capita incomes, averaging less than $200, compared with an average of about $5,000 for English and German speakers who live around the capital Windhoek. It is the high levels of poverty and unemployment in Caprivi and its neglect by the SWAPO regime that has enabled the CLA to canvass for support.

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