

Angola: MPLA inflicts new defeats on UNITA

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The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola government launched a determined military attack on the rebel forces of the Union for Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in September. As the beginning of the rainy season, September normally marks a scaling down of military activity, but this year was an exception.

Eduardo Dos Santos's government troops — the Forças Armadas Angolanas (FAA) — have taken the towns of Bailundo and Andulo in the Central Highlands. The towns have symbolic significance for UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi — Andulo is his hometown, whilst Bailundo had been his headquarters since the fall of Huambo in 1994, and was once the seat of an Ovimbundun Chiefdom to which Savimbi has family ties.

This region of the Central Highlands has been a zone of control for the UNITA forces, which enabled it to direct up to 70 percent of the Angolan countryside. The government had only been able to control the majority of the cities and big towns. An *Africa Confidential Newsletter* report said that the government had used Brazilian EMB-312 Tucano jets flown from the Catombela airbase in Benguela Province.

It appears that UNITA forces withdrew in the face of a massive show of force by the FAA. The FAA was keen to make up for its previous attack on Bailundo, when UNITA forces were able to repulse them. There is a determination to prosecute the war for the complete destruction of UNITA. David Dias, first secretary of the People's Liberation Movement of Angola (MPLA) in Namibe province, said in a radio broadcast, “the Armed Forces, the National Police and the Civil Defence have got the headquarters of Savimbi at Andulo and Bailundo. These seizures and others too, cannot signify the end of our fight.”

A report in the *Zimbabwe Independent* of November 5 states that 2,000 Zimbabwean troops have been deployed in Angola to aid the MPLA troops. The same report claims that Savimbi has now sought refuge in Uganda.

In the civil war that followed Angolan independence in 1974, UNITA was backed by the USA and also received

support from the apartheid regime in South Africa, whereas the Soviet Union backed the MPLA. This remained the situation up to the early 1990s when there was an attempt to create a government of national reconciliation, which culminated in the 1994 peace agreement. Following the breakdown of negotiations in December 1998, the civil war resumed. UN peacekeeping forces were withdrawn at the beginning of this year. Human rights groups are critical, saying that the UN had failed to prevent both sides from building up their military hardware — UNITA from its sale of diamonds, in spite of a UN embargo, and the MPLA government from its oil revenues. It appeared that a protracted conflict was beginning.

Both UNITA and the government are led by wealthy and corrupt cliques prepared to continue their war profiteering at the expense of a population already traumatised and impoverished by years of conflict. UNITA forces are infamous for their brutalisation of local populations, including the use of forced labour. The MPLA regime, despite its pretensions to socialism in the past, is renowned for the lavish lifestyle its leaders enjoy, and their refusal to spend any of the country's oil wealth on social welfare. Millions of starving and homeless Angolans depend solely on aid from charities. It seems that the recent increases in oil prices and new discoveries in the Angolan oil fields have now tipped the military balance in favour of the MPLA.

Reports in the South African *Mail and Guardian* allege that the MPLA is receiving tacit backing from Western governments, particularly the United States. An article on October 15 reports the workings of the recently established United States-Angola Bi-national Consultative Commission (BNCC) which meets in Washington, and discussed the need for military cooperation to crush the UNITA rebels. Referring to the BNCC meeting the report says, “recent events an ocean away could do more to influence the course of the 25-year civil war than any event on home ground”.

In the *Mail and Guardian* article, US analyst Ed Marek

states that an American-based mercenary operation, Military Personnel Resources Incorporated (MPRI), had or was about to do a deal with the Angolan government. Contacts in the South African security services confirmed these developments. “Marek's report confirms information given by a source inside the security industry to the *Mail and Guardian* two months ago that MPRI was already on site at offshore rigs in Cabinda and Soyo, and providing training and advice to the Angolan military before the September offensive,” the article states. MPRI is staffed by former high-ranking US army personnel and enjoys close ties to the US government.

The article reveals that according to Marek, “the deal between MPRI and President Eduardo dos Santos's government was tied up last month. Assistant Secretary of State Susan Rice, pursuing US policies of distance from regimes guilty of human rights abuses had blocked the proposed contract. Economic considerations have now apparently bulked larger than those of a humanitarian order.”

In 1996, the Elf Oil Company discovered the Girassol field, which has estimated reserves of a billion barrels. Over the last two years there have been more discoveries in Angolan offshore oilfields than in any other country. According to the state oil company, Sonagol, there will be \$19bn of foreign investment in oil production over the next three years. US companies have a joint investment with Sonagol in the Cabinda field, which produces two-thirds of the total Angolan 800,000-barrel per day output. The United States currently buys around 75 percent of the oil produced by the Angolan offshore fields.

The United Nation's decision to reestablish a mission in Angola is further evidence that international recognition is now being extended to the MPLA. Pressure has come from the United States, Russia and Portugal, who were the guarantors of the failed 1994 peace agreement. A *CNN* report of October 15, quotes US envoy Nancy Soderberg saying, “We have been strongly supportive of having a continued presence in Angola and urged the secretary-general [of the UN] to negotiate to that end.”

Following their withdrawal from the Central Highlands, UNITA has moved into the northeast area of Angola bordering the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is likely that they will try to prosecute a guerrilla war, and they have said they will attack the capital Luanda. The *Economist* magazine of November 5 reports, “International oil and diamond companies, operating concessions awarded by the government, are growing twitchy at the threat of attack.”

The UNITA leadership is, however, in a state of disarray. An *Africa Confidential Newsletter* reports that Savimbi phoned his relatives in Europe and said he has never felt more threatened by an MPLA action. Savimbi's former bodyguard Lt. Colonel Marcolino Ngongo, who surrendered recently, reported that Savimbi's forces are being overwhelmed by the government offensive, and that UN sanctions preventing him selling diamonds were beginning to bite. “He is desperate due to the loss of Andulo and Bailundo, his main pillars that he always vowed to defend at all cost.”

The 25-year-old conflict continues to inflict a terrible toll on ordinary people. Around one million have died since its inception, and according to the UN around 200 Angolans die of starvation each day in conditions exacerbated by the war. Currently there are around two million displaced people.

Although government policy is to encourage people to return to their home areas, the lack of security means very little agricultural activity is taking place. The period up to February is the lean season, and humanitarian agencies expect to see increased demand for relief. Refugees have flooded into the government-controlled towns and cities for protection — abandoning the countryside.

A *Medecins sans Frontieres* (MSF) team working in the town of Matala, which is in the southern province of Huila, estimate the rate of severe malnutrition at 13 percent. MSF says “severe means just before terminal.” MSF operates in the Central Highlands city of Kuito and it reports increasing numbers of new people attending its feeding centre. They are seeing cases of Pellagra — a skin disease brought on by vitamin deficiency. An MSF official explained that the government successes have not relieved the situation. Referring to the cities that had previously been besieged by UNITA forces, he explained that “there is no commercial influx of commodities into the towns. Many residents with no access to affordable food are also becoming vulnerable.”



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