

Train bombing signals new UNITA offensive in Angola

Chris Talbot
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The latest reports put the number killed when a train was blown up in Angola last week at 252. UNITA, the notoriously brutal organisation led by Jonas Savimbi that has been fighting a civil war with the Angolan government since 1975, claimed responsibility for the attack.

The train hit a mine between the towns of Zenza and Dondo, 150 kilometres south-east of the Angolan capital, Luanda. The train was carrying fuel that exploded and fire spread to the neighbouring carriages. Of about 500 people that were on board, 165 were injured.

A UNITA spokesman claimed that the train was a legitimate target, as it was carrying arms and military supplies and had a large military and police escort. However, survivors told the press that there were only a small number of soldiers guarding the train. Military escorts are standard procedure on transport in Angola. Reports state that UNITA militia gunned down civilians fleeing from the train.

The train attack is the biggest operation mounted by UNITA since it was routed by the forces of the MPLA government in 1999. According to BBC news reports, UNITA has managed to regroup since then, using guerrilla tactics to hit at areas throughout the country, including the coastal regions where the government is well established. Recent reports include the killing of 80 people in an attack on the town of Caxito, east of Luanda, the abduction of 60 children from an orphanage, as well as attacks on the towns of Uige, Cacuso east of Malange and Menongue in southern Cuando Cubango province.

UNITA forces move into towns long enough to seize weapons, food and clothing then pull out before the Angolan army can respond. In the central highlands region, the centre of UNITA's operations in the 1990s, while it no longer controls the towns, UNITA continues to raid villages and loot crops. Although there are supposed to be UN sanctions in place, UNITA is estimated to still be earning \$100 million a year from the sale of diamonds from its mining operations and can purchase weapons to compliment the arms it seizes in guerrilla operations.

Control over the areas UNITA captured in the 1970s and 1980s was maintained by kidnapping children and young people, with males forcibly recruited into its army and girls being enslaved as "wives". Some women were publicly burnt

as witches and discipline was enforced by torture, imprisonment in deep pits and killings. Another characteristic of Savimbi's methods is that all potential rivals, and anyone challenging his authority, are systematically murdered. As a result of the war with UNITA, normal economic life in much of Angola has all but disintegrated. Since 1975, an estimated 500,000 people have been killed and 100,000 mutilated, mainly by mines that have been laid in many areas of the countryside. Four million people out of a population of 12 million remain displaced from their homes and are forced to rely on international food aid.

After the collapse of the 1994-98 peace process, the MPLA government, equipped with a 90,000-strong army and billions of dollars worth of arms bought with its oil wealth (Angola is second only to Nigeria in West Africa's oil production), moved to finish off UNITA. In 1999, UNITA's main southern base at Jamba was destroyed and its forces were finally driven out of their main bases in the central highlands. However, the Angolan government is now apparently retreating from the position it held two years ago that UNITA could be defeated militarily. In May this year, Angolan President José Eduardo Dos Santos called for a "route to peace" and for a dialogue with UNITA.

After the failure to secure a peace agreement with UNITA in the 1990s, as the *Economist* magazine recently put it: "the UN not only cast UNITA in the role of villain but completely ostracised it. The Angolan government, as the lesser of two evils, was supported in its stated refusal ever to negotiate with Mr Savimbi..."

The fact that two years later UNITA has been able to revive its forces clearly demands an explanation. A brief consideration of the history of the civil war shows how this vile organisation has survived for the last 26 years, and sheds some light on its present fortunes.

The MPLA came to power in 1975, after the collapse of the fascist regime in Portugal and the collapse of Portuguese colonies in Africa, including Angola. By 1976 the MPLA, with backing from Cuban troops but also with widespread support in the population for its struggle against Portuguese colonialism, had virtually wiped out UNITA's forces. But UNITA was rebuilt by the South African apartheid regime, supported by the

United States. In 1979, UNITA's headquarters—the size of a small town—was paid for and built from scratch in Jamba, in the far southeast of Angola, and Savimbi was based there for the next 13 years. South African troops not only trained UNITA forces, but also carried out invasions and sabotage with their own troops. During the Cold War, millions of dollars from the CIA and South Africa went on supporting UNITA against an MPLA government that was regarded as “communist” because it received limited support from Cuba and the Soviet Union.

Despite UNITA's brutal methods becoming well known, US support continued into the 1990s. As journalist Victoria Brittain explains in her book “Death of Dignity” (Pluto Press, 1998), the move of the Western powers away from supporting the apartheid regime in South Africa in the late 1980s did not mean abandoning UNITA.

The South Africans left Angola in 1988, and by the end of that year a deal was brokered by the US for Cuban troops to pull out in exchange for South Africa granting independence to Namibia. Without South African support UNITA would have collapsed. In 1989, under the Bush administration, US financial support to UNITA increased to a record high of \$50 million. From a special centre at Kamina in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), US planes made as many as three flights a day to UNITA's bases shipping huge amounts of military equipment and support.

In 1991, with the war at a stalemate, the Western powers brought Savimbi and Dos Santos to Portugal to sign the Bicesse Accord, under which both sides agreed to disarm and demobilise their armies. Multi-party elections would then take place monitored by the UN. Following the pattern of the collapse of Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, the US administration apparently believed that the MPLA would lose all support and that their favourite, Savimbi, would easily win the elections. But despite Savimbi's public relations machine and vote rigging in the eighth of the country run by UNITA, the MPLA won the 1992 elections.

Under constant pressure from the US, the UN team supervising the elections and the provisions of the Bicesse agreement ignored the fact that whilst the MPLA had demobilised their forces, UNITA had only demobilised a tiny proportion of its troops and kept hold of all its armaments. Within two weeks of the election, UNITA had seized a third of the country. Whilst in public the US administration said it was taking an “even-handed” approach, criticising both sides for opposing national reconciliation, it continued to back UNITA, which was taking over all the main towns and cities of Angola, even attempting to seize the capital Luanda. Within three months, UNITA had driven the government forces out of two thirds of the country, the result of an obviously well planned operation.

The MPLA had to rely on volunteers to try and repel the attempted coup. It was not until June 1993 that the Clinton administration lifted its arms embargo on the MPLA

government, and even then, with more than 1,000 people a day dying in the war, the UN postponed taking sanctions against UNITA. It took until the autumn of 1993 before the MPLA built up a new army and began to push UNITA back, and another year before the MPLA could drive UNITA out of Angola's second city Huambo. US officials in Luanda even tried to persuade the MPLA to leave Savimbi in charge of the city and agree to a cease-fire.

Under pressure from the US and the UN, the MPLA government accepted the Lusaka Accords in 1994. In spite of all that had happened, UNITA were again treated as “equals”—whose forces would be incorporated into a new national army, UNITA leaders joining the government and Savimbi given a leading role, possibly as vice-president. UN-brokered peace negotiations then continued for a further four years, with Savimbi repeatedly ignoring the Accords, continuing the war in the countryside and devastating the whole country.

The role of the MPLA in the tragedy that has overtaken Angola should not be passed over in silence. In the 1970s and 80s the leaders of this organisation claimed to be “Marxists”. Their programme was, in fact, bourgeois nationalist. They advocated limited nationalisations, especially of the oil industry, as part of an effort to build up a national economy that had a measure of protection from Western imperialism by relying on support from the Soviet Union. When the USSR collapsed, however, the MPLA rapidly followed the leaders of Mozambique, Zimbabwe and the exiled ANC leaders from South Africa in fully embracing the capitalist market, as well as IMF and World Bank programmes. Desperate to win acceptance from the US and Western powers, they accepted the Bicesse and then the Lusaka Agreements, even though they were aware of UNITA's continued operations.

The MPLA has proved unable to mobilise support amongst the mass of the people, which would be needed to deal a decisive blow to UNITA. Over the last period, despite the privations suffered by the Angolan population, the MPLA elite has grown wealthy on the spoils siphoned off the oil revenues. Numerous reports from aid agencies document the refusal of the government to spend any significant amount of its revenues on food and health-care for the population. A recent report from UNICEF pointed out that 30 percent of Angolan children die before they reach the age of five, less than half even receive basic education and polio is on the increase.



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