

# COMBATING THE COMMON ENEMY? A DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF NAMIBIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE ANGOLAN CIVIL CONFLICT

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## Abstract

*Although there are several studies on post-colonial Namibia, the subject of Namibia's foreign relations in general and military operations in particular has not attracted many studies by local scholars. This subject has been left either for exploration by foreign scholarship or to local journalists to provide somewhat 'pass-by' accounts. There is thus little literature available on the subject such as the role of Namibia in the Angolan civil conflict. This reason alone is sufficient to make a compelling case on why there is a need for an account on the role of Namibia in this conflict. Produced on account of necessity, it is the hope of this author that it serves as a foundation for further research; regardless of the perspective – for or against, as long as studies on the subject exist. Most of the studies on conflict resolution and peacemaking are often focused on colonialism as if Namibia and generally southern Africa did not witness more than 20 years of post-colonial majority rule. This article seeks to explain the contours of conflict studies from colonial to post-colonial period.*

## Introduction – What is the context?

Found on the Atlantic coast of South-West Africa, Angola is a natural-resources-endowed southern African country that occupies approximately 1 246 700 square kilometers. Populated with more than 14 million people, Angola was a former colony of Portugal. The Portuguese explorers first came to Angola in 1483. Their conquest and exploitation became concrete when Paulo Dias de Novais erected a colonial settlement in Luanda in 1575. By the time that the 1880s Berlin conference apportioned Angola to Portugal, the Portuguese had already established themselves in Angola. They made sure that they not only destroyed the kingdoms existing there at the time, as a basis of the social, political and economic reorganisation of Angolan society, but also pitted various kingdoms against one another. The indigenous

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groups launched brave resistance against the Portuguese from the 1500s to the 1900s, with the Portuguese finally gaining full military control of the whole of Angola, thus effectively imposing and enforcing their colonial policies on those living in the country (Birmingham, 1966; De Andrede, 1982; Heywood, 1987; Malaquias, 2007; Pitcher, 1991). This article discusses the Angolan conflict which caused more than 700 000 war-related deaths and was responsible for more than 400 000 Angolans having to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. The same conflict caused tremendous damage to the Angolan rural life, thus leading to one of the highest urbanisation rates to be experienced in Africa (Hodges, 2001; Malaquias, 2007). The conflict started as a battle to capture state power after Portugal granted independence to Angola in 1975. The nationalist movements were largely distinct as well as antagonistic from and towards one another. The protracted conflict came to an end in February 2002 when the UNITA rebel leader, Jonas Savimbi, was assassinated.

In this article, particular attention is given to the role that Namibia played in the conflict, after discussing the conflict itself. The role of Namibia cannot be fully understood without understanding the conflict, both in its historicity and during the period when post-independent Namibia became involved in it.

### **The bloody race towards 11 November and the 1991 Bicesse Accord**

As common characteristics of colonialism, exploitation, subjugation, segregation and assimilation characterised Portuguese colonial policy. By the 1930s and 1940s most Angolans were already socially and politically engaged in the colonial exploitative question, and the associated way forward. Such engagement was more profound in the urban areas of the country. As such, several social, sports and cultural groups started to coordinate with respect to the need for and manner of spearheading the anti-colonial resistance. Of these, the African National League and the Association of Natives of Angola were chiefly instrumental in facilitating the anti-colonial resistance discourses. By the late 1950s, the groups had emerged with a political and nationalist character which, subsequently, led to the start of the armed anti-colonial struggle in 1961. Fortunately for the nationalists concerned, in 1974 a coup occurred in Portugal that saw the custodianship of the colonial project in Angola overthrown. The new regime that took control of the country was not committed to the project. Consequently, colonialism and anti-colonial resistance in Angola came to an abrupt end (Hodges, 2001; Malaquias, 2007).

In January 1975, in Portugal, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) and National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) signed the Alvor Accord, which provided a transitional roadmap towards the independence date

of 11 November 1975. Due to antagonistic factors, which will be elaborated upon below, the Alvor Accord lost its meaning for those who were involved in nationalist movements and they all went their separate ways, with the intention of capturing power come 11 November 1975. The antagonistic factors were the root cause of the conflict. The Angolan nationalist movements were largely fragmented, and could not agree on who should take over state power in post-colonial Angola. The movements developed as distinct, sharing neither a joint perspective, nor the same identities; they all had differing ethnic origins and foreign backers, and saw one another as obstacles that must be removed for each to assume power (Comerford, 2005; Hodges, 2001; Malaquias, 2007; Mills, 2009). Hodges (2001, p. 89) explains how distinctive the nationalist movements were:

[The] MPLA was founded in Luanda in 1956 and drew its support mainly from the Mbundu, the country's second largest ethnic group. [It] was heavily influenced by Marxist ideas ... [and] received arms and diplomatic assistance from the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] and other soviet bloc countries from the 1960s. FNLA [drew its support from] the Bakongo – populated extreme north-west ... The Bakongo are Angola's third largest ethnic group and also constitute a large part of the population of neighbouring Congo and Democratic Republic of Congo ... FNLA waged a low-key guerrilla war in north-western Angola, backed up from its bases in Zaire, where it enjoyed the support of the former dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko ... UNITA came into being in 1966. It had very little external support and concentrated on building up an underground political movement among the Ovimbundu, who, despite constituting Angola's largest ethnic group, had not been mobilized to any significant extent by either MPLA or FNLA.

It was for these different interests that, when 11 November arrived, the country was largely divided, with each of the movements controlling their part of the country. Hodges (2001, p. 10) succinctly captures the race towards 11 November between the Angola nationalist movements and their respective allies in the following description:

South Africa, which pursued a classic 'divide-and-rule' strategy by forging an alliance with UNITA and the FNLA, invaded southern Angola in August 1975 and, by October, had advanced more than half way up to the Angolan coast to within 200 km of Luanda. The Zairean army invaded in the north, in support of the FNLA. The United States meanwhile provided covert support to both UNITA and the FNLA, to counter-balance soviet military assistance to the MPLA. In response to South African invasion, Cuba sent troops to Angola, from October 1975. This ensured that, when independence was formally declared in November, the MPLA was in control of the capital, where it proclaimed a 'people's republic' and appointed its leader Agostino Neto, as President. Over the following few months, the Cuban helped the MPLA to secure control over the whole country. The US intervention halted, following the passage of Clark Amendment, which barred support for any of the Angolan factions ... This left the South African government in the lurch, forcing it to withdraw its forces back across the border into northern Namibia in 1976.

Malaquias (2007, p. 39) corroborates with Hodges (2001) with the following:

At independence Angola had essentially three governments: MPLA backed by Cuban troops controlled Luanda, the capital, and little else; UNITA controlled Huambo, the second largest city and several southern provinces with South African help while FNLA, supported by Zairean troops, held the northern provinces.

The fighting did not end after the weakening of UNITA by the withdrawal of South Africa, or the halt caused by the Clark Amendment that barred the United States from supporting any Angolan belligerents. FNLA was virtually destroyed in the bloody race towards 11 November. Thereafter UNITA began to reorganise. UNITA's leader, Jonas Savimbi, managed to establish good relations with Zaire – then under the leadership of Mobutu Sese Seko, resulting in the granting of permission for UNITA to establish bases in Zaire for its guerrilla activities. Correspondingly, South Africa renewed its support for UNITA by actively participating in the military offensives inside Angola. The South African apartheid regime launched numerous military operations in Angola all stemming from what it termed a 'total strategy' that was the regime's response to what it perceived as a 'communist onslaught' in the region. It launched such operations as 'Operation Sceptic', 'Operation Protea' and 'Operation Daisy', which all included support for UNITA and an attack on the 'communists' (the South West African People's Organisation [SWAPO], the African National Congress [ANC], and the MPLA, keeping in mind that the ANC and SWAPO had a presence in Angola). The repeal of the Clark Amendment in July 1985 also saw the United States resuming its support for UNITA. As happened in the race towards November 11, the Soviets and the Cubans came to the aid of the MPLA. Cuba thus maintained about 50 000 ground troops in the country. Protracted fighting followed this state of affairs (Grobbelaar et al, 2003; Hodges, 2001; Malaquias, 2007; Mills, 2009).

The MPLA and its allies (Cuba, the ANC and SWAPO) met at the confrontational decisive battle of Cuito Cuanavale against UNITA and the South African forces. After the battle, the belligerent forces agreed to the cessation of fighting and allowed for the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 435, which led to the withdrawal of the Cuban troops and paved the way for Namibia's independence. As a result, UNITA and the ruling MPLA signed the Bicesse peace agreement in 1991 (Anstee, 1996; Comerford, 2005; Grobbelaar et al., 2003; Hodges, 2001; Malaquias, 2007; Mills, 2009; Prunier, 2009).

### **The 1990s abortive peace deals**

The late 1980s and the early 1990s were to be decisive in the political dynamics of the conflict. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and Apartheid soon after that, there was a greater propensity towards

peace and negotiations with the aim of ending the Angolan conflict. As such, negotiations took place between the MPLA government and UNITA in Portugal, which led to the signing of the Bicesse Accord between the two antagonists in May 1991. The Bicesse Accord provided for a ceasefire, the quartering of UNITA troops, the establishment of unified armed forces, surplus troop demobilization, the restoration of government administration in the UNITA stronghold, and multi-party parliamentary and presidential elections. This process was to be overseen by a joint politico-military commission, with the support of the UN through UNAVEM II. As expected, the United States, Portugal and the USSR played a role in the process due to their respective linkages to the conflict (with Portugal as the former coloniser, the USSR as the supporter of the MPLA, and the United States as the forerunner of the peace deal and former backer of UNITA). The election, which was held in September 1992, was won by the MPLA, and declared by the UN to have been free and fair. When UNITA refused to accept the election results, Angola was launched into war once again (Hodges, 2001; Malaquias, 2007).

When UNITA returned to war after the 1992 elections, it no longer enjoyed the support of its former allies, apart from Zaire. UNITA, however, managed to fund its war from the returns that it earned through the sale of diamonds in the areas under its grip. Several UN sanctions left Jonas Savimbi with no choice but to agree to a new peace deal – the Lusaka Protocol. This peace agreement embodied the attributes of the Bicesse Accord, but also included new measures, such as power-sharing and the prioritisation of the military settlement before elections. The agreement was signed on 21 November 1994. As a result, the UN deployed about 7 000 troops under UNAVEM III. However, since UNITA totally flouted the Lusaka Protocol, it was never implemented. After several years of fighting, President dos Santos, following the December 1999 MPLA congress, terminated the Lusaka peace process, and called for the withdrawal of UN troops, and directed the Angolan Armed Forces (FAA) to launch a total offensive against UNITA (Hodges, 2001; Malaquias, 2007). UNITA, without its allies and together with the sanctions that were imposed on it, could no longer resist the FAA offensive. UNITA's leader, Savimbi, was subsequently assassinated, marking the resumption of peace, national reconciliation, reconstruction, and development. Grobbelaar et al (2003, p. 8) summarised their overview of this period as follows:

Jonas Savimbi's death on 22 February 2002 provided the decisive factor that ended the conflict. It resulted in the signing of a truce between the surviving military leaders of UNITA and the MPLA government on 4 April 2002 in Luanda. The pace of political change and military demobilization since then has been breathtaking. By early August 2002, the process of quartering UNITA soldiers and their families had officially been concluded, with more than 80 000 soldiers (35 000 more than initially expected) and around 260 000 family members involved.

## **The role of Namibia**

The war in Angola was not only a national security concern to Namibia, but it also carried significant political history. Namibia's ruling party, SWAPO, has historical links with the MPLA, having fought together against the same opponent (UNITA) before Namibia gained independence in 1990 (Dzinesa & Rupiya, 2005). The conflict in Angola can be regarded as somewhat of an unfinished business for the ruling SWAPO and the MPLA. This descriptive account does not trace the historic role of Namibia before independence, but is concerned with the role of post-independent Namibia in the Angolan conflict between 1994 and 2002.

### *Role under the UN*

The first role of Namibia was part of various UN missions in the region, starting in the mid-1990s:

[Namibia] participated in the United Nations Angola Verification Mission (UNAVEM III) in 1996 and has been rotated two times since its deployment there. Although the UN Plan called for the withdrawal of all military contingents by the end of February 1997, the Namibian contingent was requested by the UN to stay on up to August 1997. The government accepted the UN request and a replacement force was selected, prepared and dispatched in March 1997. [The] mission with UNAVEM III has been changed from road verification and VIP escort to that of a Rapid Reaction Force (RRF). The contingent continued to serve with the United Nations Observer Mission in Angola (MONUA) at the request of the UN after UNAVEM III was terminated. Its duty in Angola ended in February 1999. (MoD, 2000)

The above is corroborated by Dzinesa and Rupiya (2005, p. 222) who state:

The NDF also contributed personnel to serve on the United Nations Angola Verification Mission (UNAVEM) III in 1996. UN Security Council Resolution 976 of 8 February 1995 established the multidimensional UNAVEM III to assist the government and UNITA in restoring peace and achieving national reconciliation against a fragile politico-military background. Initially assigned road verification and VIP escort duties, the UNAVEM Namibian contingent was later asked to act as a Rapid Reaction Force. The NDF contingent continued to serve with the smaller United Nations Observer Mission for Angola (MONUA), which replaced UNAVEM III on 30 June 1997.

Namibia also took part in various diplomatic regional meetings on the conflict. This included several meetings held by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and meetings called by the neighbouring countries that were directly affected by the conflict through the physical fighting and the destruction of human activities, or indirectly through the influx of the refugees that were fleeing the war zones. The neighbouring countries and their leaders, particularly Zambia's Frederick Chiluba and Namibia's Sam Nujoma, all scaled up diplomatic efforts aimed at isolating UNITA. After a one-day summit called by President Chiluba, and attended by Namibia's President Sam Nujoma and Angola's President

Jose Eduardo dos Santos, these three leaders held UNITA's leader, Jonas Savimbi, responsible for the continuation of the conflict, given his reneging on the 1994 Lusaka Protocol. They further sought to isolate UNITA by calling on the international community to uphold the United Nations sanctions against UNITA which had banned UNITA's trade of diamonds (the returns funding its war activities) and also uphold the limitation of movement of UNITA leaders. President Nujoma was also regarded as a key player in the resolution of the Angolan conflict. It is for this reason that Issa Diallo, the then UN Secretary General Special Envoy to Angola, saw it necessary to travel to Windhoek to consult with President Nujoma and seek advice on how to move from this precarious conflict to a positive peace process (Prunier, 2009; BBC, 1999; Boksenbaum, 1999; Dzinesa & Rupiya, 2005).

### *Military role*

In addition to its role under the UN banner, the NDF was an integral part of the conflict given Namibia's national security concern. Namibia treated the Angolan conflict as its own, for UNITA had been involved in the killings of several Namibians in the northern part of the country. The two ruling parties, the MPLA and SWAPO, have close historical ties. The state of affairs thus caused Windhoek to become actively involved in the conflict. As Prunier (2009, p. 192) explains:

UNITA infiltrations in the north [of Namibia] forced the Namibian Defence Force to integrate its operational plans with those of the FAA and to operate as far as north of Mavinga, five hundred kilometres into Angola, to protect its border.

The above is authenticated by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) report of 17 December 1999, in which the NDF Chief of Staff, Major-General Martin Shalli, is said to have acknowledged that Namibian forces had crossed the border into Angola in support of the Angolan Armed Forces (FAA). Apart from the physical participation in the war inside Angola, Namibia had also granted permission to the FAA to come into Namibia in pursuit of the UNITA rebels who, at the time, had retreated as far as northern Namibia. The permission also included the launching of attacks against UNITA from Namibian soil (BBC, 1999; Grobbelaar et al., 2003; Prunier, 2009).

Boksenbaum (1999) explains Namibia's military intervention in the Angolan conflict as follows:

Namibia's unannounced involvement in the fighting should not have come as a surprise. On April 9 [1999] the southwest African country signed a mutual defence pact with Angola, the DRC and Zimbabwe. The pact, signed by defence ministers in Luanda, provides for mutual military support should any of the signatory countries face 'internal or external aggression'. It outlined support for Kabila's war against rebels and the Angolan government's drawn-out battle with UNITA.

Apart from integrating its troops with the FAA, allowing the FAA to enter Namibia in search of UNITA forces, and allowing the FAA to launch attacks on UNITA from Namibian soil, Namibia also deployed NDF soldiers at its borders with Angola in response to the destabilisation that was caused when UNITA forces started fleeing into northern Namibia (ISS, 2011). President Nujoma summarises this as quoted in Dzinesa and Rupiya (2005, p. 227): “The Army launched hot pursuit operations that minimised UNITA atrocities in Namibia. In the process, these hot pursuit operations into Angola destroyed UNITA bases and many tons of war material were captured. The Army contributed greatly to the reduction of UNITA terrorists’ morale and, subsequently, their effectiveness, which resulted in their annihilation, and the elimination of Jonas Savimbi on 22 February 2002.”

### **Conclusion**

As a Portuguese colony, Angola was administered like a province of Portugal. Before the formal declaration of Angola as a province of Portugal and, indeed, before the Berlin conference offered Angola as a Portuguese economic sphere of interest, the Portuguese had already established themselves in Angola (as far back as the 1500s). Their exploitation of the Angolan natives caused a political awakening, leading to the formulation of social discourses on anti-colonial resistance. In 1961, the Angolan nationalist movements launched an armed anti-colonial resistance. While the anti-colonial struggle was going on, a coup occurred in Lisbon in 1974, which would usher into a new era in Angolan history – one of colonialism and anti-colonial resistance. The new regime that took over after independence was not interested in the continuity of the colonial project. Indeed, it agreed, together with the nationalist movements, that 11 November 1975 would see the birth of Angola’s independence, which occurred as had been planned.

Unfortunately, the nationalist movements could not forge a common perspective for the future of an independent Angola. They thus started fighting one another in their attempts to capture state power come 11 November 1975. Due to the political climate in international politics at the time, which was dominated by the Cold War, the Angolan conflict was to take on an international dimension. Cuba and the Soviet Union supported the MPLA, whereas the United States and South Africa supported UNITA, while Zaire supported the FNLA. Ferocious fighting surfaced as a result. The MPLA managed to win the first part of the war, especially the part waged between 1974 and 1976. With the assistance of Cuba, the MPLA managed to seize control of Luanda and formed a new government on 11 November 1975.

UNITA and its allies reorganised and, with the FNLA seemingly having been destroyed, new fighting broke out. UNITA again took control of some provinces, specifically those in the rural parts of Angola. During this period, UNITA enjoyed the financial and military support of the United States and that of South Africa. The latter actively took part in military offensives in Angola for it had security interests in the area, since the ANC and SWAPO had bases within Angola. The ANC and SWAPO were fighting against the South African apartheid government also present in Namibia at the time. In response, Cuba increased its number of troops in Angola, thus taking on, with its allies, UNITA and South African forces. When the international community realised that the war could not be concluded militarily, and especially with the end of the Cold War, peace processes with the aim to resolve the conflict, were started.

The first peace processes saw the withdrawal of the Cuban troops and the granting of independence to Namibia. The Bicesse Accord was finally signed by the MPLA. UNITA called for a ceasefire and set out the roadmap towards the September 1992 elections, supervised by the UN. The elections took place and the MPLA emerged victorious. Although the UN declared the elections to have been both free and fair, UNITA rejected the results, and went to war once more. This time, UNITA had to rely on the revenue raised from the sale of diamonds from the seized mines to finance its war, because its allies were no longer supporting it. The Lusaka peace talks resumed, culminating in the signing of the Lusaka Protocol. This protocol contained the provisions of the Bicesse Accord as well as some new provisions. UNITA flouted this agreement, and again went to war. This led to the MPLA suspending the peace talks, calling for the UN to withdraw, and directing the FAA to launch a full-scale attack on UNITA. The FAA attacks subsequently resulted in the assassination of UNITA's leader, Jonas Savimbi, which was a decisive moment that saw the ushering of an era of real peace in Angola.

This article focused on two important elements: the first was to provide a descriptive historical account of the origin, manifestation and outcomes of the Angolan civil conflict that started shortly after Independence and ended with the assassination of UNITA's leader, Jonas Savimbi, in 2002. The second and most important element was a descriptive account detailing the role of Namibia in this civil conflict. Namibia was an active participant in this conflict. The country's involvement in the conflict was motivated by two key considerations. Firstly, the historical ties that exist between Namibia's ruling SWAPO Party and Angola's MPLA saw the continuation of the war against UNITA, which was already waged prior to Namibia's independence in 1990. The second consideration was Namibia's own national security concern. A war-torn Angola meant that thousands of refugees flocked into northern Namibia. UNITA bandits also crossed into Namibian territory, terrorising the Namibians in the northern regions. Namibia

therefore participated in this conflict on the basis of the above considerations. The participation of Namibia in this civil conflict was three-fold: Firstly, Namibia participated in regional peace-making efforts that mostly took the form of diplomatic efforts. Secondly, the NDF participated in the UN International peace-making efforts. Thirdly, the NDF integrated its activities with those of the FAA in militarily combating UNITA. Namibia's participation in the Angolan civil conflict must therefore be viewed as a necessary act in combating a common enemy, not only for the sake of peace within Angola, but also for the sake of Namibia itself, and the entire southern Africa.

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Amupanda, Combating the common enemy? A descriptive account of Namibia's involvement in the Angolan civil conflict, pp. 57-67

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