

Keesing's Record of World Events (formerly Keesing's Contemporary Archives),
Volume 27, November, 1981 Namibia, Page 31208

© 1931-2006 Keesing's Worldwide, LLC - All Rights Reserved.

South African "Hot Pursuit" Operations - August 1981 Incursion into Angola

The South African and territorial forces launched major "hot pursuit" raids into Angolan territory in May, at the beginning and end of July and at the end of August. The late-August raid was the largest South African incursion into Angola since their military support for UNITA and National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) forces in November 1975 [see 27661 A]; it resulted in some 1,000 deaths (according to South African military sources) and gave rise to strong international condemnation of the South African Government [see below].

The New York Times reported on June 6, 1981, that more than 60 soldiers and civilians had been killed in South African raids into southern Angola in the previous 10 days. In a letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dr Kurt Waldheim, sent on June 26, Mr Eliseo de Figueiredo, the Angolan permanent representative at the UN, declared that South Africa had recently escalated the number of incursions into his country and alleged that more than 95,000 troops and mercenaries were concentrated in Namibia in preparation for a large-scale war.

It was reported on July 12 that another South African raid had penetrated 90 miles into Angola; according to South African military sources 114 SWAPO guerrillas were killed in this raid, while Angolan sources claimed that there were Angolan soldiers among 127 people killed.

Mr Lucio Lara, secretary-general of the ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola-Party of Labour (MPLA-PT), declared in Lisbon on July 28 that South African attacks were causing his Government to devote "over 50 per cent of its budget to defence". He continued: "We are subject to 24-hour aggression. Hundreds of trucks which should be used for health work, agriculture and education are being directed to the war effort and our best youth is being conscripted to fight."

An Angolan Defence Ministry communiqué issued on July 30 stated that a South African force consisting of an infantry brigade, a motorized infantry battalion, two mixed battalions of mercenaries and South African troops and air cover from Impala jet aircraft and Puma and Abuette helicopter gunships had advanced 90 miles into Angolan territory. On the same day, Gen. Magnus Malan, the South African Defence Minister, denied that an invasion had taken place, but admitted that "certain follow-up and hot pursuit operations are constantly carried out against SWAPO terrorists in southern Angola".

Angolan officials visiting Lisbon were reported by *The Guardian* (of July 30) as having claimed that the Angolan Army was avoiding pitched battles with the invading forces; they were also said to have stressed that Angola would not hesitate to ask Cuban troops presently in the country to act as a safety-net against large-scale South African attacks and, if necessary, to join the front line of defence.

Gen. Lloyd claimed (on July 30) that operations in southern Angola during July had shattered the command structure of two out of three regional SWAPO headquarters and forced the guerrillas to regroup 30 to 35 miles from the border. He alleged that his forces were engaged in short-term raids across the border and were not occupying towns. On the other hand, Mr Figueiredo claimed at the United Nations on Aug. 7 that South African forces had occupied a number of localities as well as undertaking "large-scale destruction of the area"; he also alleged that, "parallel to the devastating military invasion", South Africa had "reinforced its military strength in the territory of Namibia with an additional 40,000 armed men

The official Angolan news agency Angop reported that on Aug. 17 two civilian buses carrying people to the Chiulo mission hospital in Cunene province had been bombed by South African Impala jets and that 19 civilians had been killed; a similar attack was said to have taken place the following day resulting in nine civilian deaths. The agency also reported on Aug. 22 that 45 people had been killed inside Angola in the previous week and warned that an assault on Ngiva (formerly Pereira d'Eca), the capital of Cunene province, was imminent.

Preceded on Aug. 23 by heavy bombing raids on the towns of Cahama and Chibemba (80-120 miles inside Angola and on the main road linking Ngiva and Lubango), SADR and SWATF units mounted a major incursion across the border on Aug. 24. According to Angolan sources, the South African force comprised two motorized columns, with more than 80 vehicles and 32 tanks, and was quickly involved in heavy fighting around Xangongo, where positions of the Angolan Army suffered heavy bombing. In response, the Angolan Defence Ministry cancelled all military leave and ordered officers and men to report to their units within 48 hours.

Code-named "Operation Protea" by the South Africans, the incursion involved one task force being sent up the west bank of the Cunene river to cut off SWAPO guerrillas from possible escape to the east; a further two units were deployed to the north and southeast of Xangongo to prevent Angolan interference, and the main force then moved on to attack SWAPO bases to the south of Xangongo. At the outset, South African jets incapacitated Angola's early warning radar systems and air defence installations and dropped leaflets advising the Angolans that they would not be attacked if they stayed out of the fighting.

Mr P. W. Botha, the South African Prime Minister, admitted in Parliament in Cape Town on Aug. 26 that South African troops were fighting inside Angola, but described reports of a large-scale invasion as an "absolute misrepresentation of the real state of affairs". He claimed that the "so-called invasion" was "simply one of the follow-up operations and would have been carried out without incident if the MPLA, as in the recent past, had not intervened".

Mr Adao Rodrigues Malo, the Angolan Director of Information, told *The Times* on Aug. 26 that South Africa was trying to destabilize Angola because the South Africans were under strong pressure from international opinion over Namibia. He also denied that there had been any significant concentration of SWAPO guerrillas which could have prompted an invasion so deep into Angolan territory.

Having on Aug. 24 called upon Dr Waldheim to bring international pressure to bear to halt the South African incursion, President José Edouardo dos Santos of Angola on Aug. 27 formally requested that the UN security Council should be convened to demand an immediate withdrawal of South African forces and to "take the necessary steps to avoid a confrontation of an even bigger magnitude". [For subsequent UN proceedings see below] He claimed that as he was sending this message the capital of Cunene province (Ngiva) was being attacked by 135 tanks, 140 other vehicles and 38 helicopters supported by reconnaissance aircraft and that there were 45,000 troops poised on the Namibian border, ready to mount a full-scale invasion of his country.

Gen. Constand Viljoen, Chief of the SADF, denied on Aug. 28 that his forces were using tanks and claimed that South African troops were already withdrawing, having inflicted "heavy losses, numbering many hundreds" on SWAPO. While giving no statistics of the size of the South African force involved in the operation, he described Angolan estimates as "totally laughable"; at the same time he and other military spokesmen admitted that the South African force had come into direct conflict with Angolan Army during the incursion. (Speaking in Belgrade on Aug. 28 during a visit to Yugoslavia, the SWAPO leader, Mr Nujoma, claimed that the Angolan Army was fighting the South Africans and denied that his guerrillas were involved, since they fought in Namibia and not in Angola.)

In his Aug. 28 communiqué Gen. Vujoen explained that the South African action was "a follow-up, pre-emptive operation" carried out against "SWAPO installations and depots north of the border". While this operation was being carried out, he continued, "it was brought to the notice of the territorial force that important SWAPO depots and an area headquarters were situated in the region of Xangongo", so that "fighting groups immediately advanced in that direction and another group was sent to cut off SWAPO escape routes across a bridge". The Angolan forces "were warned but had apparently, and with premeditation, awaited our troops and attacked them". He claimed that this was "proved by the fact that they had evacuated the local population hours before the attack in preparation for what they were planning".

Although the South Africans claimed that they were directing their attacks against SWAPO bases, journalists who had been flown to Xangongo on Aug. 30 reported that the nearby Angolan Army headquarters had been heavily bombarded. Moreover, whereas South African spokesmen claimed that every effort had been made to avoid attacks on civilian targets, several ambassadors in Luanda who were taken to visit the town of Cahama on Aug. 30 reported that it had been destroyed.

A party of about 30 foreign journalists was attacked by South African jets on Sept. 5 on the road between Chibemba and Cahama. Although South Africa claimed that the attack occurred because the journalists were accompanied by SWAPO representatives, one of the journalists declared that this was "simply not true" since their escort was "entirely composed of regular Angolan soldiers".

Dr Philippe Matuba, director of the hospital at Lubango, was reported in *The Guardian* (Sept. 8) as stating that 403 people wounded as a result of the South African raid had registered at his hospital since Aug. 23. He also claimed that the South Africans had bombed the medical post at Cahama, "which had a red cross on its roof" (this attack being subsequently confirmed by journalists).

Mr Stig Anderson, leader of a UN disaster relief mission in Angola, estimated on Sept. 15 that some 130,000 people had been displaced by the South African raid.

Mr Adriano Sebastiao, the Angolan ambassador to Portugal, declared on Sept. 1 that South African claims that their forces were withdrawing from Angola were a "diversionary tactic" to hide their intention to occupy southern Angola permanently, and warned that if South African forces continued to remain in Angola his Government would be forced "to employ actively the internationalist Cuban forces" stationed in Angola.

On the same day South African officials admitted that the withdrawal was taking longer than expected, and three reasons were cited for this delay: (i) land mines planted on the roads leading south; (ii) the need to repair South African vehicles; and (iii) difficulties posed by the hundreds of tons of captured military equipment. However, reports from Luanda on Sept. 2 suggested that there was no sign of a withdrawal by the South African forces.

From the north-east of Cunene province it was reported in early September that a motorized South African infantry force was trying to push its way into Huila province further north in a flanking movement, having met determined Angolan resistance at Cahama. In the view of the Angolan Government, this further penetration indicated that South Africa was intent on occupying a buffer zone in the south including Huila province as the main food supplier to the border area.

Angolan sources claimed that over 11,000 South African troops were occupying Cunene province by Sept. 3, and that another force was moving towards Mavinga, in Cuando Cubango province (to the east of Cunene province) and some 100 miles from the border. The following day East European sources said that a South African column had been spotted in the bush some 50 miles east of Menongue, the capital of Cuando Cubango province, this claim being supported by Western diplomats who said that a third motorized column had thrust deep into south-eastern Angola, apparently to resupply the UNITA guerrillas. Angola's official newspaper, *Jornal de Angola*, said on Sept. 4 that South Africa was prolonging its occupation of the southern part of the country to "create the minimum conditions for the territorial balkanization of Angola and the installation of its puppets in the occupied zone

Ten days after South African military officials had claimed that "Operation Protea" had ended, Lt.-Gen. Jan Geldenhuys, Chief of the South African Army, declared on Sept. 14 that the incursion had been "very successful", although it had not achieved all its objectives.

Lt.-Gen. Geldenhuys claimed that "about 1,000" of the enemy had been killed, 38 prisoners taken and 10 of his own forces killed. He acknowledged that the sweep by the South African forces to cut off SWAPO's main line of retreat had failed because the encirclement had not been completed in time, thereby allowing a large number of SWAPO guerrillas to escape. He declared that SWAPO had been driven further north and had suffered considerable personnel losses and that a lot of their equipment had been captured or destroyed. He also claimed that SWAPO's command structure had been disrupted and their logistics system rendered, at least temporarily, "totally ineffective".

President dos Santos on Sept. 10 rejected the idea that South Africa had directed its attack against SWAPO, declaring that the raid had been "an attack on the defenceless Angolan population and against our regular forces". He alleged that UNITA was "an instrument of South Africa" and suggested that the South African strategy was to strengthen the UNITA presence in the border areas in order "to make the settlement of the Namibian problem more difficult".

This allegation was supported by a report in *The Daily Telegraph* (of Sept. 12) which suggested that UNITA guerrillas had moved into Cunene province, thus making SWAPO infiltration into Namibia more difficult and so helping to prevent any attempt by Angolan troops to reoccupy the southern border area. During "Operation Protea" South African forces captured one Soviet officer and killed four others. Gen. Malan subsequently claimed that this provided "indisputable evidence of the Russian involvement" in the guerrilla war in Namibia.

According to a South African account issued on Sept. 1, Sgt. -Maj. Nicholai Feodorovich Pestretsov was captured about 30 miles from the Namibian border (while standing by the body of his dead wife) and two Soviet lieutenant-colonels and two Soviet women (including Sgt.-Maj. Pestretsov's wife) were killed in the operation. After interrogation it was discovered that Sgt.-Maj. Pestretsov had been in charge of a military vehicle repair depot, with seven Angolan mechanics working under him.

Gen. Malan also claimed on Sept. 1, 1981, that South African forces had discovered an enormous amount of Russian propaganda material" in SWAPO offices which clearly indicated "Russian aspirations" in southern Africa. He expressed the hope that the Western world would "take serious note of this" and that it would "lead to a more balanced approach by the Western powers"; he also declared that there could be no doubt that SWAPO was "directly controlled and given ideological and material support by the Soviet Union".

Mr Luis de Almeida, the Angolan ambassador to France, denied on Sept. 2 that Soviet troops were working with SWAPO. He stated that there was nothing surprising in the presence of Soviet experts and advisers in Angola, since Angola possessed sophisticated Soviet equipment and therefore needed advisers to train Angolans in its use.

Speaking in Luanda on Sept. 5, Mr Nujoma also denied that Soviet personnel were actively participating in SWAPO, declaring that "ours is a war of national resistance being fought by Namibians and Namibians alone" against South Africa's "illegal and colonial occupation of our country".

It was reported in mid-October that negotiations were in progress through the International Committee of the Red Cross for the exchange of the Soviet soldier for a South African soldier captured by SWAPO in 1979.

At the request of the Angolan Government [see above], the UN security Council met on Aug. 28 to consider the South African incursion into southern Angola. Its discussions concluded on Aug. 31 with the United States vetoing a resolution strongly condemning South Africa which had been supported by 13 member states, and with the United Kingdom abstaining. The voting thus represented an open disagreement between the three Western members of the Namibian contact group which were also members of the security Council (i.e. France, the United Kingdom and the United States), although all three had voiced strong condemnation of the South African action.

The vetoed resolution strongly condemned the "racist regime" of South Africa for its "premeditated, unprovoked and persistent armed invasion of Angola; demanded the "immediate and unconditional withdrawal" of all South African troops; and declared that such an invasion "constitutes a danger to international peace and security".

Explaining his Government's action, **Mr Charles M. Lichenstein**, the US deputy permanent representative at the UN, said that the United States "had to vote against a resolution which places the blame solely on South Africa for the escalation of violence which plagues the entire region". While deploring the South African action in Angola, he explicitly criticized the "particularly large Cuban force" (estimated at up to 20,000) in Angola and the supply of Soviet arms and advisers to Namibian guerrillas, all of which fuelled "the explosive atmosphere of confrontation and violence".

Sir Anthony Parsons, the UK permanent representative at the UN, stated that there was much in the draft resolution which his Government supported, particularly the "demand for immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all South African troops" from Angola, but maintained that the draft still contained elements which the United Kingdom found difficult to support.

General reaction among third-world countries to the US veto was summed up by **Mr Olara Otunnu** of Uganda, speaking for the nonaligned members of the security Council, who asked: "How can we expect the international community to take the security Council seriously when a permanent member lets South Africa, the aggressor, go scot free"

An emergency special session of the UN General Assembly on Namibia opened in New York on Sept. 3, having been formally requested in August by Dr Elleck Mashingaidze (Zimbabwe), then chairman of the 50-nation African group.

The session voted by 117 votes to 22 (mainly Western countries) with six abstentions not to give the South African delegation a hearing during the session, whereupon the delegation claimed that the UN had "graphically demonstrated its inability to be fair and impartial in the conflict over Namibia". [Although remaining a member of the United nations, South Africa had been excluded from sessions of the General Assembly since 1974—see 26866 B.]

The UN emergency special session concluded on Sept. 14 by adopting a resolution urging the security Council to respond positively to the overwhelming demand of the international community by immediately imposing comprehensive mandatory sanctions against South Africa. The resolution was adopted by 117 votes to none, with 25 abstentions (including the five members of the Western contact group).

Explaining the abstention of the 10 members of the European Community, Sir Anthony Parsons (UK) took particular exception to the provisions reaffirming support for the armed struggle of SWAPO as the "sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people".

Meanwhile, a new US diplomatic initiative to achieve Namibian independence appeared to have made some progress, notably in that the South African Government was reported to have listed a number of detailed constitutional guarantees for a settlement and to have asked for "confidence-building measures". According to a US State Department disclosure of Sept. 5, important elements of this progress included a South African acceptance of both UN security Council Resolution 435 and a UN peace-keeping force in Namibia to enforce its limitations and to ensure free elections.

Officials of the other four members of the Western contact group voiced guarded optimism over this new development, but generally took the view that no major breakthrough was yet in sight. South African officials maintained that their Government's basic position on Namibian independence had not changed, although they avoided challenging the US assertion that progress had been made.

Mr Donald Sole, the South African ambassador to the USA, claimed in a newspaper interview on Sept. 12 that agreement on an independence plan had been reached with the United States. On the following day the Johannesburg *Sunday Times* gave the following details of what was understood to be the new US plan: (i) South Africa would be required to accept UN supervision of elections in Namibia and the stationing of UN troops there until independence and to drop demands for specific constitutional rights for the White minority; (ii) in return Angola would be asked to agree to the withdrawal of Cuban troops before elections in Namibia and to open talks with UNITA guerrillas, apparently with a view to their being included in a future government of national unity; and (iii) SWAPO would formally agree not to enter into military pacts with any outside nations if, as expected, it won the independence elections.

On the other hand, a US State Department spokesman declared on Sept. 17 that the Reagan Administration was "not creating any formal linkage" between Namibian independence and a withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. He continued: "There is no way the Angolan situation can be incorporated into UN Resolution 435. However, we do believe we could move this thing forward really quite rapidly if we are able to achieve some form of undertaking or commitment from the Angolan side regarding a Cuban withdrawal, which would obviously have to be related in some general sense to the implementation of a Namibian settlement. But we are not talking about a precondition."

Mr Nujoma for his part declared in an interview with *The Financial Times* (of Sept. 18) that any suggestions that South Africa was ready to agree to the UN settlement plan for Namibia were "just manoeuvres to maintain Namibia under its grip". He asserted that South Africa was pushing ahead with its "internal settlement" for Namibia, and warned that SWAPO was "prepared to fight a protracted armed struggle"; he also expressed the view that there was "manoeuvring behind the scenes, particularly by the Reagan Administration, to undermine the authority of the United Nations".

A high-level South African delegation, which was led by Mr Fourie and also included Mr Hough and Mr Adriaan Eksteen (South Africa's permanent representative at the UN), met Dr Crocker in Zurich on Sept. 21.

At this meeting new US proposals were discussed, the main points of which were (i) that independence should be granted to Namibia by January 1983, with implementation beginning in early 1982 and involving the holding of elections; (ii) that SWAPO and South Africa should agree in advance that a guarantee of basic human rights would be written into the Namibian constitution; (iii) that UN troops, probably drawn from the Western contact group and possibly wearing national rather than UN uniforms, would police and monitor the elections; (iv) that there would be no SWAPO military presence in Namibia during this period, with guerrillas being confined to their bases in Angola under UN supervision; that Angola would ensure that Cuban troops stayed north of a stipulated "red line"; (v) that SWAPO should guarantee, if it won the elections, that it would not allow Namibia to be used as a base for guerrilla attacks against South Africa; and (vi) that Walvis Bay, an important deep-water port which was situated geographically within Namibia but which had been incorporated into South Africa in 1977 [see page 28791], would be subject to separate negotiations after independence.

Although Dr Crocker said that "no progress" had been made at the Zurich talks, a communiqué issued by the Foreign Ministers of the five Western contact group nations following a meeting in New York on Sept. 24 announced that they had "developed proposals for a timetable for further and final negotiations with the objective of implementation of security Council Resolution 435 in 1982" and would begin discussing these proposals with all interested parties during October 1981. (Guardian - Financial Times - International Herald Tribune - New York Times - Cape Times - Le Monde - Times - Daily Telegraph - Sunday Times - Observer - Economist - Africa - UN Information Centre, London - US International Communication Agency - BBC Summary of World Broadcasts) (*Prev. rep. 30861 A, 30549 A*)