

HISTORIC TURNING POINT AT CUITO CUANAVALÉ

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I am pleased to participate in this event as part of our country's commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the historic outcome of the Battle at Cuito Cuanavale. I take this opportunity to state that we need our universities and other institutions to undertake the necessary research that is always necessary to arrive at objective findings. This is especially necessary given the importance of what happened in the remote south-east wilderness of Angola during 1987/1988 – the place the Portuguese referred to as *The Land at the End of the Earth* - which created a veritable earthquake that changed the political landscape of our region.

We should note that the Cuban archives on these events have been opened to researchers (such as the American academic Prof Piero Gleijeses who has produced most notable works and the Egyptian film maker Jihan El Tahri, amongst others). Even a great deal of the United States material has been made available. The Angolans are contributing what they can, given that the country was suffering from severe dislocation at the time; with similar problems faced by SWAPO and the ANC MK forces. We in a democratic South Africa have had great difficulty in locating the records of the apartheid-era South African Defence Force (SADF), the State Security Council and Department of Foreign Affairs. It is unfortunate, for example, that the State Security Council minutes are extremely and probably deliberately cursory, an obvious hindrance to research. The good

news is that with our help researchers such as Prof Gleijesis have had some success in unearthing important documentation, and that all concerned departments of state such as Defence, Foreign Affairs and Intelligence have been cooperating with the National History Archives to search for illusive records – with the intention to declassify what we can. I am sure this will reveal much in assisting us to complete an understanding and appreciation. Judging by debate in Parliament last March, as well as letters to the media, divided opinion in our country is evident, for unfortunately many politicians and officers who were connected with the apartheid order still strive to maintain that they were triumphant at Cuito Cuanavale.

I am therefore encouraged by the presence of retired General Roland de Vries, who served both our democratic defence force and the former apartheid military, as I know him to be an emancipated and sober-minded person who was directly connected with the period under discussion and I look forward to his input. In fact interaction such as this should take place between all the belligerents of the time, to contribute their account of what occurred.

When Jorge Risquet, one of Fidel Castro's shrewdest and most trusted colleagues, addressed the Seventh Congress of the South African Communist Party, hosted in Cuba in April 1989, he was greeted with the resounding salutation "Viva Cuito Cuanavale!" For the South African delegates, many from military duty in Angola itself, there was no doubt whatsoever that an epic victory had been won over the apartheid military machine in that embattled country the previous year, constituting a historic turning point in the struggle for liberation. When Risquet quoted Fidel's assertion that "the history of Africa will be written as before and after Cuito Cuanavale," he brought the house down.

Whilst the generals and pundits of the former South African Defence Force (SADF) are at pains to claim victory¹ the acid test is to consider the outcome. The SADF which had carried out continuous invasions and incursions into Angola

since that country's hard-won independence in 1975 (which was the reason for the Cuban military presence in the first place) had been forced to totally withdraw; the independence of Namibia was soon to be agreed; the prospect for South African freedom had never been more promising. Before the commencement of the battle for Cuito Cuanavale in October 1987 the apartheid regime was implacably opposed to any of those options. Whilst the post-Cuito negotiations also agreed on Cuban troop withdrawal from Angola, and relocation of ANC military camps, this was no set-back compared to the enormity of the strategic gains. In commemorating the 20th anniversary of the battle this year and the historic outcome that changed the face of southern Africa – according to Nelson Mandela “a turning point for the liberation of our continent and my people”² - it is necessary to clarify what exactly transpired.

It is a paradox that a place where Southern Africa's history dramatically turned should be so well off the beaten track. Cuito Cuanavale is a minor town near the course of two rivers that constitute its name, set in the remote, bushy and featureless expanse of southeast Angola.

The prelude to the battle started in July 1987 when Angolan government forces (Fapla) attempted to advance on Jonas Savimbi's Unita strongholds at Mavinga, the strategic key to his base at Jamba near the Caprivi Strip. With Pretoria's assistance in the south and Mobutu's help from Zaire, Unita had grown stronger over the years and its actions had spread to the north, central and eastern parts of Angola. It was believed that a direct attack against Savimbi's south eastern headquarters would most disrupt him, but this was contrary to Cuban advice. At first the offensive progressed well, with a battle-hardened and superbly equipped Fapla gaining the upper hand, inflicting heavy casualties on Unita, driving them south towards Mavinga, some 150 kilometers distant. Then in October, Fapla's advancing 47th Brigade, at the Lomba River, 40 kilometers south-east of Cuito, was all but destroyed in a surprise attack by SADF forces hastening to Unita's rescue. Catastrophe followed as several other Fapla brigades, sustaining heavy

casualties wilted under overwhelming ground and air bombardment but managed to retreat to Cuito. The situation could not have been graver. Cuito could have been overrun then and there by the SADF, changing the strategic situation overnight. The interior of the country would have been opened up to domination by Unita with Angola being split in half. This was something Pretoria and Savimbi had been aiming at for years. But the SADF failed to seize the initiative. This allowed an initial contingent of 120 Cuban troops to rush to the town from Menongue, 150 kilometers to the north-west and help Fapla organize the defences. As the ferocious siege developed, Pretoria's generals and western diplomats confidently predicted Cuito's imminent fall.

I have had the opportunity to hear the views from both Fidel Castro on the one hand, and General Kat Liebenberg, South African army chief, on the other. The briefing from Fidel took place in Havana's Defence Ministry, at the end of 1988. He pointed out on a huge table-top, sand model of southern Angola, the drama that had unfolded. Our delegation headed by Joe Slovo hung on his every word. The SADF was far too cautious and missed a remarkable opportunity, Fidel observed. After their success on the Lomba they could have quickly taken the town.³

According to General Liebenberg, with whom I later established a convivial relationship, the SADF's main aim apart from stopping Fapla's advance, was to keep the town under constant bombardment to prevent its airstrip from being used. He politely stuck to the conventional SADF face-saving explanation for he well knew that if Cuito had been taken Unita would have been placed in a most advantageous position. But admitting that meant they had failed in their objective.

The actions of the SADF are clear evidence of their determination to breakthrough to the town. For six months they threw everything they had at the beleaguered outpost, in their desire to seize the prize. They relentlessly pounded Cuito with sixteen massive 155mm G-5 and G-6 (self-propelled) guns and

staged attack after attack led by the crack 61st mechanized battalion, 32 Buffalo battalion (actually two battalions with its own armour and artillery units), and later 4th SA Infantry group. These units operated as a powerful ad-hoc brigade. The Fapla defenders doggedly held out, reinforced by 1,500 elite troops that arrived from Cuba in December. By March 23, 1988, the last major attack on Cuito was “brought to a grinding and definite halt”, in the words of 32 Battalion commander, Colonel Jan Breytenbach.⁴ He writes: “the Unita soldiers did a lot of dying that day” and “the full weight of Fapla’s defensive fire was brought down on the heads of [SADF] Regiment President Steyn and the already bleeding Unita.” The SADF prided themselves on a minimal loss of life, that was because they used black infantry troops such as their Unita proxy and SWATF (in Namibia) as cannon fodder whilst the white troops brought-up the rear from the safety of armoured vehicles and tanks. The SADF deployed upwards of 5,000 men at Cuito alone, according to their commander-in-chief, General Jan Geldenhuys,⁵ but this could possibly have been as much as 6,000 men.⁶ In addition there were several thousand Unita troops involved. They were repulsed by the Cubans and six thousand determined Fapla defenders.

The numerous pro-SADF accounts focus on the engagements leading up to Cuito, and the siege itself, meticulously recorded battlefield manoeuvres and achievements. Indeed they describe tactical efficiency and resourcefulness, but cannot conceal the fact that they failed to conquer the town, and they play-down the later decisive military developments on the Namibian border that commenced in April 1988 and peaked in June. Colonel Breytenbach is the exception here. He observed: “With a lack of foresight the South Africans had allowed the bulk of their available combat power to be tied down on the Cuito Cuanavale front.” In his view this should have been regarded as a secondary front. This was in sharp contrast to General Geldenhuys fixating on the pretence of a SADF victory at Cuito and lamely claiming that the new front opened-up by the Cubans in the west was akin to Castro “kicking the ball into touch” as though that part of southern Angola was outside the field of play. His actual words were: “Our

opponents boast that they had beat us... because they won some line outs.”⁷ The saga at Cuito Cuanavale can be correctly characterized as a Cuban-Angolan defensive victory. Undoubtedly wars are not won by defensive engagements. The significance of Cuito is that the defenders not only saved the day, but bought the time to enable the Cuban-Angolan side to turn the tables and by April launch a breathtaking offensive in the southwest that changed the course of our history. General Geldenhuys knew very well, like a rugby captain suddenly forced onto the defensive, that the ball was very much in play and his opponents were robustly driving forward having gained the initiative. In fact stopping the SADF in its tracks at Cuito and then decisively seizing the initiative and going on the offensive was similar to the great turning point in the Second World War, when the Nazi forces were halted at Stalingrad at the end of 1942 and subsequently driven back to Berlin.

Lest there be any lingering doubt about the outcome at Cuito Cuanavale, listen to what the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), closely monitoring events in Angola, noted in an intelligence report dated April 15, 1988: Cuito Cuanavale was no longer an isolated outpost. Cuban troops had secured the road from Menongue to Cuito. “Any SADF/Unita attempt to cut off the main supply route would be met with very heavy resistance.” Cuban planes and anti-aircraft weapons had reversed the situation for the South African forces arrayed against Cuito: the absence of the SA airforce in the area had become “notable”. The JCS further observed: “Lacking air superiority, the SADF was unable to conduct an air resupply effort resulting in less responsive resupply effort over land.”⁸

At his table-top model Fidel pointed out the amazing feat of a 50,000 strong Cuban, Fapla and SWAPO troop deployment, along a front stretching from Angola’s southern port of Namibe in the west along the railway line, through Lubango on to Menongue and Cuito in the east. These were under the command of Cuba’s General Leopoldo Cintras Frias and Angola’s General Antonio Dos Santos Franca “Ndalú”. The SADF forces at Cuito were sidelined,

like a major piece on a chess board that has prematurely advanced, as powerful armed forces with the latest Soviet weaponry, moved forwards in the south west, under superior air cover, towards the Namibian border. Angola's Cunene and Mocamedes provinces were liberated after years of SADF control.

A master stroke was the rapid construction of airstrips at Cahama and Xangongo near the border, which brought the strategic Ruacana and Calueque hydro-electric dam systems, on the Cunene River within striking distance. Soviet Mig-23s had demonstrated their superiority over South Africa's aged Mirage fighters and now that they commanded the skies the network of SADF bases in northern Namibia was at their mercy.

Fidel showed quiet pride in this achievement, cutting a thoughtful figure. Behind the singular achievement was outstanding military acumen and not a foolhardy gambler depicted by his detractors, including Greg Mills in a recent "Sunday Independent" article.⁹ It was at this point that he used his now famous boxing analogy to explain the carefully formulated strategy: Cuito Cuanavale in the east represented the boxer's defensive left fist that blocks the blow, whilst in the west the powerful right fist had struck - placing the SADF in a perilous position.¹⁰ To return to that other sporting metaphor misused by Geldenhuys, play swung robustly from the east-end of the rugby field to the west-end with the Cubans, Fapla and SWAPO on the attack and the SADF uncomfortably pinned back on the borderline.

The end for the SADF was signaled on June 27, 1988. A squadron of Migs bombed the Ruacana and Calueque installations, cutting the water supply to Ovamboland and its military bases and killing 11 young South African conscripts. A Mig-23 executed a neat victory roll over Ruacana on the Namibian side of the border. The war was effectively over.

The SADF was clearly out-foxed in Angola. Magnus Malan, South Africa's Minister of Defence, had admitted that "as far as the Defence Force was concerned [Fidel Castro] was an unknown presence in military terms, and therefore it was difficult to predict his intentions."¹¹ This amounted to an astonishing intelligence failure coming a dozen years after the SADF first encountered the Cubans in Angola. Malan was not alone in this ignorance, however, for the Americans had been in confrontation with Havana since the 1960's and appeared to know no better. Along with Pretoria they expected a Soviet Union eager for rapprochement with the West to curtail Cuba's actions. They were surprised to discover that the Soviet Union's so-called proxy had not even consulted Moscow over Havana's massive intervention. They were even more taken aback when sophisticated Soviet military equipment was rushed to Angola to supply the Cuban-Angolan offensive.

The Cubans could have marched into Namibia but exercised restraint, with all parties, including the USA and Soviet Union, looking for compromise and a way forward in negotiations that had previously been going nowhere. Fidel was not looking for a bloody encounter which would have cost many lives on both sides. Neither were apartheid's generals and political leaders. They could afford casualties even less than the Cubans, considering the popular mass struggle and growing armed actions within Namibia and **South** Africa and the serious problem with white conscription.

Chester Crocker, America's chief negotiator, had to be given a special exemption to meet with the Cuban delegation owing to the United States embargo of that country. Crocker, whose country had long supported Unita and earlier Holden Roberto's FLNA against the MPLA, was to confide: "Reading the Cubans is yet another art form. They are prepared for both war and peace. We witness considerable tactical finesse and genuinely creative moves at the table."¹² His opinion of the South Africans was that "they confused military power with national strategy." In his book "High Noon in Southern Africa", about the conflict and the

negotiations, Crocker writes: "...a former academic colleague confirmed my impressions. After spending ten days with Pretoria's military, diplomatic, and intelligence establishment, he reported to me that he had seldom seen a government so utterly confused and at cross-purposes over basic questions of policy. Given the absence of strategic guidance from top political levels, it was remarkable that SADF chief of staff Jannie Geldenhuys and his military colleagues avoided disaster in Angola during the first half of 1988."

The central negotiation issue was UN Security Council Resolution 435 of 1978, concerning South Africa's withdrawal from Namibia, and that country's independence. Linked to this was the departure of Cuban troops from Angola. It is history that the last SADF soldier left Angola at the end of August 1988, and that Namibia became independent in March 1990, even before the Cuban exodus from Angola. Apartheid Foreign Minister, Pik Botha, had tried to modify Resolution 435, asserting that the SADF would withdraw from Angola only "if Russia and its proxies did the same." They made no mention of even considering a withdrawal from Namibia. "Business Day" reported on March 16, 1988 that Pretoria was "offering to withdraw into Namibia – not from Namibia – in return for the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola. The implication is that South Africa has no real intention of giving up the territory any time soon."

These attempts, however, proved futile in the face of the changed balance of forces and were demolished by Jorge Risquet who gave Pik Botha a roasting: "The time for your military adventures, for the acts of aggression that you have pursued with impunity, for your massacres of refugees...is over," he chided. He accused Botha that Pretoria was behaving as though it was "a victorious army, rather than what it really is: a defeated aggressor that is withdrawing...South Africa must face the fact that it will not obtain at the negotiating table what it could not achieve on the battlefield."¹³

What materialised at Cuito Cuanavale set in chain a process that finally broke the ascendancy of the military hawks and politicians in Pretoria. Together with the struggle within South Africa, and apartheid's international isolation, the country's freedom was soon achieved. It is fitting that at Freedom Park, outside Pretoria, the 2,070 names of Cuban soldiers who fell in Angola between 1975 and 1988, are inscribed along with the names of South Africans who died during the liberation struggle. Those patriots and internationalists were motivated by a single goal – an end to racial rule and genuine African independence. After thirteen years defending Angolan sovereignty the Cubans took nothing home except the bones of their fallen and our gratitude.

It is also noteworthy that for most of those years Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) combatants engaged the adversary in many parts of Angola, co-operated with Fapla and SWAPO units, as well as with Cuban and Soviet advisers, aided in the interception and translation of Afrikaans radio traffic, and provided invaluable intelligence on the SADF. One hundred-and-thirty MK combatants and a number of SADF members lost their lives in action during that time.

Tens of thousands of Africans were killed by South Africa's murderous security forces, in Angola and Mozambique where they waged almost continuous dirty wars against those newly liberated countries, and in bloody massacres of civilians, refugees and freedom fighters in such places as Cassinga, Gaborone, Maseru, Manzini, Matola and elsewhere, in the desperate attempt to save white supremacy and prevent the future being born. The die-hard officers of the former SADF and apartheid politicians of the time try to claim they were fighting to save Southern Africa from communism, but that was a myth to curry favour with the West during the cold war. The era of racist, colonial rule they strove to perpetuate has thankfully passed into history. All the states of our region are enjoying peace and stability and getting on with the developmental tasks of creating a better life for their people now that apartheid is no more. Fidel's prediction that Africa's history would radically change after the Battle for Cuito

Cuanavale has been borne-out. It is imperative that our people, and particularly the younger generation, be made aware of Cuba's remarkable sacrifice and contribution to Africa's freedom and independence, and the heroic role of the independent states of our region.

In the commemoration events connected with Cuito Cuanavale, much of which has been driven by the Speaker of the National Assembly, Baleka Mbete, the point is made that the decisive turning point that occurred brought about a "win-win" solution for all South Africans and, in fact, for our South African Development Community (SADC) region and continent.

I agree with this claim, for irrespective of what side of the battle lines the protagonists served, the closure of the shameful era of colonialism and apartheid in our region, so interlinked with the breakthrough at Cuito Cuanavale, has freed us all and opened the way for progressive advancement to the benefit of everybody. Many of those generals and politicians who still stubbornly claim that the SADF was victorious at Cuito Cuanavale are in fact enjoying favourable business opportunities with their former Angolan adversaries.

The research that we need in South Africa must enable us to get to that balanced, objective understanding that is necessary if we are to learn from history and educate our children and the coming generations with the weapon of the truth.

A greatly abridged version of this article was published in the Sunday Independent, 23 March 2008

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- ¹ Magnus Malan. 2006. My Life with the SA Defence Force. Protea Book House; Jan Breytenbach. 2002. Buffalo Soldiers. Galago Press; Helmoed Heitman. 1990. War in Angola. Ashanti Publishing; Peter Stiff. 1999. Silent War. Galago Press; Fred Bridgland. 1990. The War for Africa. Ashanti Publishing.
- ² Piero Gleijesis. July 11, 2007. Cuito Cuanavale Revisited. Mail & Guardian.
- ³ Ronnie Kasrils. 2004. Armed and Dangerous. Jonathan Ball Publishers.
- ⁴ Jan Breytenbach. 2002. The Buffalo Soldiers. Galago Publishing.
- ⁵ Le Figaro. April 1, 1998. Paris.
- ⁶ Piero Gleijesis. Interview with Lt Col Hutchinson who was at the Directorate of Operations at Army Headquarters, Pretoria.
- ⁷ Jannie Geldenhuys. 1993. Die Wat Wen. Van Schaik.
- ⁸ I am indebted to Piero Gleijesis for this and other material he has uncovered in his outstanding research and writings on the subject.
- ⁹ Greg Mills. February 24, 2008. The Sunday Independent.
- ¹⁰ Piero Gleijesis. 2006. Moscow's Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975 – 1988. Journal of Cold War Studies, Harvard.
- ¹¹ Magnus Malan, *ibid*.
- ¹² Chester Crocker. 1993. High Noon in Southern Africa. Jonathan Ball Publishers.
- ¹³ Piero Gleijesis. July 11, 2007. Mail & Guardian.