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TURNING POINT AT CUITO CUANAVALÉ

By Ronnie Kasrils

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 Castro's assertion that "the history of Africa will be written as before and after Cuito Cuanavale", he brought the house down.

While the generals and pundits of the former South African Defence Force (SADF) are at pains to claim victory, 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 withdraw; the independence of Namibia had been 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. While 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" - 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 confluence of the two rivers that constitute its name, set in the remote expanse of southeastern Angola, a region the Portuguese referred to as the Land at the End of the Earth.

The prelude to the battle started in July 1987, when Angolan government forces (Fapla) attempted to advance on Jonas Savimbi's Unita stronghold at Mavinga, the strategic key to his base at Jamba near the Caprivi Strip.

At first the offensive progressed well, with Fapla gaining the upper hand, inflicting heavy casualties on Unita, driving them south towards Mavinga.

Then in October, Fapla's advancing 47th Brigade, at the Lomba River, 40km southeast of Cuito, was all but destroyed in an attack by SADF forces hastening to Unita's rescue. Catastrophe followed as several other Fapla brigades wilted under heavy 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, 150km to the northwest and help organise the defences.

As the ferocious siege developed, Pretoria's generals and western diplomats predicted Cuito's imminent fall.

I have had the opportunity to hear the views from both Castro, on the one hand, and General Kat Liebenberg, then the South African army chief, on the other. The briefing from Castro 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, Castro observed. After their success on the Lomba they could have quickly taken the town.

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 its determination to break through 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 the massive 155mm G-5 guns and staged attack after attack led by the crack 61st mechanised battalion, 32 Buffalo battalion, and later 4th SA Infantry group. The 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. He writes: "The Unita soldiers did a lot of dying that day" and "the full weight of the Fapla's defensive fire was brought down on the heads of [SADF] Regiment President Steyn and the already bleeding Unita."

The SADF deployed upwards of 5 000 men at Cuito, according to their commander-in-chief, General Jan Geldenhuys, plus several thousand Unita troops.

They were repulsed by the Cubans and 6 000 Fapla defenders.

The numerous pro-SADF accounts focus on the engagements leading up to Cuito and the siege itself, dutifully recording their 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 in the southwest 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 stark contrast to General Geldenhuys fixating on a SADF victory at Cuito and claiming that the new front opened up by the Cubans in the west was akin to Castro "kicking the ball into touch".

The saga at Cuito Cuanavale can be correctly characterised 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 also 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. The ball was not in touch but very much in place.

At his table-top model Castro pointed out the amazing feat of a 10 000-strong Cuban, Fapla and Swapo troop deployment along a front stretching from Namibia in the west along the railway line through Lubango on to Menongue and Cuito in the east.

The SADF forces at Cuito were sidelined, like a piece on a chess board that has prematurely advanced, as powerful armed forces with the latest Soviet weaponry moved forwards in the 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 hydroelectric 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.

Castro 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, which unfortunately include Greg Mills in The Sunday Independent recently.

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, while, in the west, the powerful right fist had struck, placing the SADF in a perilous position.

The end for the SADF was signalled 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 the Ruacana dam. The war was effectively over.

The SADF was clearly outfoxed in Angola.

Magnus Malan, South Africa's then minister of defence, admitted that "as far as the Defence Force was concerned [Castro] was an unknown presence in military

terms, and therefore it was difficult to predict his intentions."

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 1960s 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 reinforcements.

The Cubans could have marched into Namibia but exercised restraint, with all parties, including the US 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, growing armed actions within South Africa itself and the problem with white conscription.

Chester Crocker, America's chief negotiator, had to be given special exemption to meet Jorge Risquet, heading the Cuban delegation, given the US embargo of that country.

Crocker 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."

His opinion of the South Africans was that "they confused military power with national strategy".

The central negotiation issues were the United Nations Security Council Resolution 435, concerning South Africa's withdrawal from Namibia, and 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 troop exodus from Angola.

What materialised at Cuito Cuanavale set in chain a process that finally broke the ascendancy of the military hawks in Pretoria.

Together with the struggle within South Africa and apartheid's international isolation, our 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 our liberation struggle.

Those patriots and internationalists were motivated by a single goal - an end to racial rule and genuine African independence. After 13 years of 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 weSizwe (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 cadres and a number of SADF members lost their lives during that time.

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