



PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

THE COMMEMORATION OF THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF CUITO CUANAVALÉ

On 23 March 1988 the guns at Cuito Cuanavale fell silent... today, 23 March 2008, a convoy carrying a South African delegation arrives in this remote little town in southern Angola to celebrate this significant day in the history of Southern Africa.

As part of the South African Parliament's initiative to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale this convoy departed from Freedom Park, Pretoria on Friday 14 March 2008 on a 10-day Heritage Trail through Botswana and Namibia en-route to Cuito Cuanavale. The delegation includes military veterans from both sides of the erstwhile political divide, representatives from government departments, Parliamentary service, scholars and civil society including journalists.

This Heritage Trail highlights the significance of the Battle and encourages an appreciation of the importance of global solidarity in the emancipation of Southern Africa and Africa. With this trail, homage is paid to all those who made the ultimate sacrifice for South Africa's liberation.

In 1987 and 1988, shielded from the international media and therefore largely unreported, the town of Cuito Cuanavale suffered under siege for over 10 months in one of the biggest, and what turned out to be the last, battles of the Cold War.

The Battle of Cuito Cuanavale, irreversibly changed the history and political landscape of the Southern African region. At the previously insignificant village of Cuito Cuanavale, Angolan, Namibian and Cuban forces managed to bring the military aggression of the apartheid military forces to a halt. At the same time, South African liberation armies fighting in Northern Angola managed to contain the Angolan rebel armies-preventing them from reinforcing the apartheid armies. The peace negotiations that followed the Battle led to the withdrawal of the South African military forces from Angola and Namibia, resulting in the independence of Namibia, and spurring on South Africa's negotiated settlement.

Yet, the Battle remains an obscured milestone in the history of 20th century humanity. Its overarching significance to the liberation of the sub-continent, however, cannot be erased. Thus, while South Africa is experiencing its second decade of liberation, there still exists a gigantic task in revealing parts of our modern history that were either distorted or ignored by the previous regime. "It is of paramount importance that we internalise the values, such as internationalism and selfless human solidarity that inspired and informed the South African liberation" says, Baleka Mbete, Speaker of the National Assembly.

The commemoration is less about the military debates or victories. It is about the lessons, about reconciliation and our movement forward to a better future. At a multi-national stakeholders workshop held at the SA Parliament in



December 2007, on the commemoration of the battle, Mr Paulo Jorge, Angolan Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time of the Battle remarked: "It is important that these examples of solidarity, of internationalism and of a spirit of sacrifice are transmitted to the young generations so that they are aware of the past struggles that led to the liberation of the homeland and, that this legacy serves as a catalyst for the reinforcement of the relationships between our countries and peoples".

At the same workshop Major-General Espirito Santo, a former MPLA Soldier at the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale and presently a General in the Angolan Army gave a personal account and commented that: "... at the beginning of the afternoon of 23 March 1988 the enemy forces withdrew, leaving behind dead and injured people and the debris of war... "

Cuban Deputy Ambassador in South Africa, Mr Enrique Orta added: "Cuba was in Africa by virtue of its internationalist principles... it was fulfilling its duty to help the people of Africa against apartheid, against racism, against colonialism, against foreign aggression. Cuba did not go to Angola seeking economic benefits [and] not to defend strategic interests and left with nothing but the coffins of its sons and daughters who died in the struggles to liberate Africa... indeed we took from Africa one of the most valuable riches that have a great significance for the Cubans - the love and respect of its peoples."

When reflecting on the 1980s it is not only the brutality of the former regime that should be recalled, but the global solidarity displayed by nations far beyond our borders, which eventually led to the fall of the apartheid regime. In a globalizing world we are often reminded of the greater level of interdependence that exists between citizens of our world. The need to strengthen the common pursuit for peace, development and the quest for universal human rights, are today as important as it was 20 years ago.

In this regard, there exists a moral obligation for Parliament to create a space for our people who were involved in the liberation movements, to transfer the values that underpinned the struggles against injustice and suppression, to the next generation. Youth today are often enveloped by a culture of individualism, spurred on by popular media encouraging material enrichment. It is of paramount importance to make this generation of South Africans aware of the sacrifices made, to ensure the conditions of freedom they enjoy today continue. This should further sensitize them to the responsibilities resting on their shoulders to play a meaningful role in improving the quality of life for all in our global village.

As a custodian of our constitutional democracy the South African Parliament expresses the hope that initiatives like this will help in healing the divisions of the past and in bringing together Africans, including those living in the African Diaspora, in an effort to build a sustainable and peaceful Africa, and the world.

For further information on the Commemorative events, please contact Luzelle Yon at the Parliamentary Millennium Programme on 021 403 8246

PARLIAMENTARY MILLENNIUM PROGRAMME
www.pmpsa.gov.za