



COMMEMORATING THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF CUITO CUANAVALÉ

PROJECT SYNOPSIS



This year marks the *20th Anniversary of the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale*. Due to the historical significance of this event in the liberation of Southern Africa it is crucial to ensure that, especially young Southern Africans are made aware of it. Moreover, the Commemoration is seen as an ideal opportunity to recommit South African society to the quest for global solidarity and to pay homage to the thousands from both within and outside our borders who paid the ultimate price for ensuring our freedom.

Given Parliament's role as the custodian of our constitutional democracy, the Presiding Officers of Parliament felt it appropriate for Parliament to take the lead in this Commemoration programme. This campaign aspires to create partnerships across erstwhile political and military divides in an attempt to facilitate dialogue towards greater reconciliation in the country's continued pursuit to building a united nation, at peace with its past. Through this programme we also seek to strengthen solidarity amongst all Africans, on the Continent as well as in the Diaspora.

BACKGROUND TO THE BATTLE OF CUITO CUANAVALÉ

In 1991 former President Nelson Mandela made Cuba his first foreign destination to pay an official visit to after his release. During this visit he remarked in an address in Havana (Cuba):

"The defeat of the racist army at Cuito Cuanavale has made it possible for me to be here today! Cuito Cuanavale is a milestone in the history of the struggle for Southern African liberation!"

From 1987 to 1988, shielded from the international media and therefore largely unreported, the town of Cuito Cuanavale suffered under siege for over ten 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 fighters of Umkhonto we Sizwe fighting in Northern Angola managed to contain Angolan rebel soldiers – preventing them from re-enforcing the apartheid armies to the south. The peace negotiations that followed the Battle led to the withdrawal of the South African military from Angola and Namibia, resulting in the independence of Namibia, and spurring on South Africa's negotiated settlement.



Image from the film *Cuba : An African Odyssey*

Yet, the Battle remains an obscured milestone in the history of twentieth 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 was either distorted or ignored by the previous regime. Furthermore, as Speaker Baleka Mbete stressed:

“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”

War – an extension of politics

Popularly known as the father of modern warfare theory, Prussian military philosopher, Carl von Clausewitz, is famed to have observed that war is an extension of politics – thus a means to an end. To this end, the former South African Defence Force’s (SADF) aggression in Southern Africa was motivated not only by its proclaimed ideological drive to stop ‘the spread of communism’, but also to contain South African and Namibian liberation movements.

Whilst still firmly controlling Namibia, dominion over the south of Angola was a crucial military objective, as the apartheid government wanted to prevent the South West African People’s Organisation (SWAPO), in particular, from getting a ‘spring board’ to launch attacks into Namibia. The strategic location of the

small town of Cuito Cuanavale was therefore of huge significance for the SADF in furthering its political and military objectives.

The apartheid government and the United States of America (USA) supported the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in its campaign against the legitimate government of Angola under the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). The MPLA was supported by a Cuban contingent of about 36 000 and 55 000 combatants.

A SADF / UNITA military victory would have meant not only the capture of the town and the destruction of the best of Angolan military formations, but quite probably, also the end of Angola’s existence as an independent country.

But despite laying siege to the town for more than ten months and, in the words of one South African military reporter (Willem Steenkamp, 2006), 'pounding Cuito Cuanavale into uselessness', they failed to take the town.

The victory at Cuito Cuanavale for the liberation forces and their Cuban compatriots was therefore decisive in consolidating Angola's independence and achieving

that of Namibia. And whilst South African liberation forces were not directly involved in the Battle, it contributed significantly to forcing the apartheid government to the negotiations that eventually led to South Africa's liberation.

The Commemoration is however, less about the military debates or victories. It is about the lessons learned, about reconciliation and our movement forward to a better future.

THE STAKEHOLDERS' FORUM



In order to ensure optimal participation in both the conceptualisation and implementation of the Commemorative Programme, Parliament brought together a diverse group of stakeholders representing government and non-government agencies in South Africa, Angola, Cuba, Namibia and Russia. At the first multi-national Stakeholders' Forum in December 2007, 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 people".

At the same event, Brigadier-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... To date, this Battle has had very serious consequences in human terms... the destruction of infrastructure, the laying of mines in large areas in the Cuito Cuanavale region

without any mine plans... there was an unnecessary loss of human lives and consequently there are orphans and widows throughout Angola."

Cuban Deputy Ambassador to 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 great significance for the Cubans – the love and respect of its peoples".

A Task Team was formed at the Stakeholders' Forum to work on consolidating proposals that were made during deliberations. The Forum resolved to launch activities for the commemoration in March 2008 followed by a series of events throughout the year. In addition, there will also be medium to long-term projects involving amongst others a de-mining campaign, developmental projects and an education campaign.

PARLIAMENTARY MILLENNIUM PROGRAMME

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CONCLUSION

When reflecting on events of twenty years back 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 globalising 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 continue to enjoy today. This should further sensitise 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 the 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 world.