

UMKHONTO WESIZWE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEFENCE OF THE AFRICAN REVOLUTION IN ANGOLA^J

GC Kwhela**

1. INTRODUCTION

Prior to independence, on 11 November, 1975, the prospective Angolan government under the leadership of the MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*) was under continuous attack from the FNLA (*Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola*) and UNITA (*União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*). The FNLA was attacking from the then Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) with the support of the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and was repelled at Quifangondo, close to the capital, Luanda. UNITA was advancing from the south in conjunction with the South African Defence Force (SADF) with the aim of capturing the capital before Independence Day. The joint UNITA-SADF forces, which held the town of N'Gunza (which was then called Novo Redondo), were repelled at the Queve River, Cuanza Sul Province by the People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA). FAPLA forces were later on reinforced by Cuban forces that provided assistance in resisting the advancement of the joint UNITA-SADF forces to Luanda and ultimately the SADF withdrew from Angola on 27 March 1976.

Although the conflict continued throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s in the Cunene, Cuando Cubango and Moxico provinces of Angola, the joint UNITA-SADF forces began another offensive in 1983 with the rejuvenated support of the United States under the Reagan administration. This was the first instance in which uMkhonto weSizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa, became a prominent actor in the defence of the African revolution in Angola, in what was then called the "eastern front" within the Malanje province. During this period MK camps also came under threat from both the UNITA and SADF forces. On the one hand, UNITA was used by the SADF to

⁰ Paper presented at the 4th War and Society in Africa Conference titled "Strategy, generalship and command in Southern Africa: Past, present, future", held at the South African Military Academy, Saldanha Bay, 4-6 September 2003.

** Centre for Military Studies, Faculty of Military Science, University of Stellenbosch

pursue MK and the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) – the armed wing of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) – within Angola in return for financial, military and logistical support that it received from the South African government. On the other hand, UNITA was also supported by the United States in its efforts to "contain the spread of communism in Africa" and to counter the support that the Angolan government received from the Cuban state and armed forces. Indeed the Reagan administration had committed itself to overthrowing the MPLA government as it was openly led by a Marxist-Leninist party and was fully supported by the former Soviet Union and its allies within the world socialist system.

Angola was always regarded as "the firm trench of the African revolution", particularly after it had declared its unswerving support for the armed wings of the national liberation movements of the Southern African states that were still under colonial and white racist domination. These included the ZIPRA (Zimbabwean People's Revolutionary Army) forces, an armed wing of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), before the liberation of Zimbabwe from the racist Ian Smith regime, as well as PLAN and MK. The African revolution therefore refers to the process of decolonisation of the continent as well as the efforts to liberate those countries that were still under colonial and white racist domination at the tip of the continent. MK, as an internationalist force, contributed hugely to this process, physically, materially and otherwise, as it fought in various battles alongside its sister organisations in the sub-continent. However, the most important contribution made by MK to the defence of the African revolution, was in Angola in the period 1987 to 1988, in what came to be labelled as the "northern front", between the Uige, Cuanza Norte and Bengo provinces of Angola. These engagements occurred simultaneously with the skirmishes that ended in the military victory for the joint FAPLA-Cuban-PLAN forces in the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. Ultimately the New York and the Geneva Agreements were signed in July and August 1988 respectively by the representatives of Angola, Cuba, South Africa and the United States. These agreements also led to the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435/78 for the independence of Namibia and the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Angola - including MK.

In order to address this significant and largely undocumented dimension of the history of the struggle for liberation in southern Africa, this paper initially deals with the first involvement of MK in the eastern front from 1983 to 1984. During this period MK camps were under threat from the UNITA forces, which in 1983 were receiving rejuvenated support from the United States under the Reagan administration. Secondly, focus shifts to the war in the south, especially the watershed of Cuito Cuanavale between the SADF-UNITA coalition and the

FAPLA-Cuban-PLAN bloc. This led to the ultimate signing of the New York and the Geneva Agreements in July and August 1988 respectively and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435/78 for the independence of Namibia and the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Angola. Finally, the paper looks at the northern front and the contribution that MK made to the defence of the northern part of Angola. The paper argues that as a consequence of a steadfast conviction to defend Angola, MK, as an internationalist force, with the joint FAPLA, Cuban and PLAN forces, played a critical role in promoting the success of the African revolution in Angola.

2. THE EASTERN FRONT: MK'S INITIAL INVOLVEMENT

After the defeat of the UNITA forces in the civil war and their withdrawal to South West Africa's Ovamboland (Namibia), they came under the tutelage of the SADF, which trained and armed them from the late 1970s onwards. With the additional support of American conservatives, UNITA began to conduct operations in the majority of Angola's 18 provinces.¹ Moreover, the continued occupation of Angola by the SADF gave UNITA latitude to spread its attacks to the northern provinces, such as Uige and Malanje.² In justifying South Africa's support to UNITA, the then South African Defence Minister, general Magnus Malan, claimed that UNITA's existence was in essence in South Africa's own interests. According to Malan, UNITA controlled areas in southern Angola in which SWAPO guerrillas were not allowed to move freely.³ He went on to accuse the Western governments of being silent about the Angolan government's active support for SWAPO and the ANC by providing training and other facilities to these movements.⁴

Since the southern African region was dominated militarily and economically by South Africa, it was Angola that took the major brunt for opposing the racist governed state by directly supporting SWAPO and the ANC as well as ZAPU before Zimbabwean independence. Besides, Angola was also supportive of the nine member states of the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC) throughout their struggle against apartheid South Africa⁵. According to Paul Moorcraft, the racist government in South Africa had several political

¹ KM Campbell, "Southern Africa in Soviet foreign policy", *Adelphi Papers* No. 227, (1987/8 Winter), p. 9.

² H Campbell, *The siege of Cuito Cuanavale* (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1990), p. 15.

³ M Malan, "Statement by the Minister of Defence: South Africa's connection with UNITA, 20 September 1985", *The South African Defence Force Yearbook 1986* (Durban: Walker-Ramus, 1985), p. 29.

⁴ Malan, p. 33.

⁵ K Somerville, *Angola: Politics, economics and society* (London and Boulder: Frances Pinter and Lynne Rienner, 1986), p. 179.

intentions in Angola, which in a continuum included replacing the MPLA government with a UNITA-led government; creating a coalition government between the two forces; assisting UNITA to establish a secessionist state in southern Angola; developing conditions for the establishment of a greater Ovamboland in northern Namibia and southern Angola; and if all else failed, maintain the Angolan government on the defensive.⁶ Hence, the military strategy of the SADF was aimed at comprehensively destroying Angola's infrastructure; containing PLAN and MK forces by continuously destroying their military bases and facilities in Angola and forcing them further northwards; and providing military and financial support to UNITA so that it could constitute a buffer against the alliance of FAPLA, Cuban, PLAN and MK forces. Technically, therefore, the SADF was engaged in a double-pronged type of conflict in Angola: a counter-insurgency campaign against SWAPO and MK over the future of Namibia and South Africa; and a conventional war in southern Angola to project and protect UNITA.

In the east of Luanda, MK cadres were, in 1983, helping their MPLA hosts in counter-insurgency operations against the South African-backed UNITA forces.⁷ The leadership of the ANC decided to involve MK cadres to fight against UNITA alongside the Angolan armed forces in August 1983, and these MK forces were led by their Army Political Commissar, Chris Hani.⁸ The intention of deploying MK was to drive UNITA forces from the Malanje province where they were threatening the largest MK training camp in Caculama. A brigade was mobilised under the leadership of Timothy Mokoena and Lennox "Mjojo" Zuma, with Chris Hani as the overall commander. Lennox was regarded as a combat experienced soldier having fought in both the Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns of 1967-8 and in Mozambique alongside FRELIMO.⁹ The successes that were achieved in the campaigns against UNITA proved MK forces to be well-trained and, as such, impressed the Soviet advisors that were attached to the Angolan armed forces.¹⁰ Accordingly, in November 1983, UNITA confirmed that its positions were hit in Huambo, Bie and Cuanza Sul by a joint force of FAPLA, Cuban, SWAPO and MK combatants in an offensive that the Angolan government claimed had been organised to wipe out UNITA's second strategic front.¹¹

⁶ PL Moorcraft, *African nemesis: War and revolution in Southern Africa (1945 – 2010)* (London: Brassey's, 1990), p. 184.

⁷ H Barrell, *MK: The ANC's armed struggle* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 54.

⁸ K Somerville, *Southern Africa and the Soviet Union: From communist international to the Commonwealth of Independent States* (London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1993), p. 244.

⁹ *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 29, No. 25, 16 December 1988.

¹⁰ Somerville, *Southern Africa...*, p. 244.

¹¹ Somerville, *Angola...*, p. 66.

However, as a result of insufficient equipment to fight such a war, since there were no helicopters, reconnaissance aircraft, heavy artillery or mortars to seek and destroy the enemy, the conflict proved disastrous for MK towards January 1984, with heavy casualties being experienced in the battlefield. Consequently, MK combatants began to rebel,¹² beginning in December 1983, when disturbances were reported in Cangandala amongst a company of MK combatants that was engaged in combat in co-operation with FAPLA. Problems emerged when MK cadres refused to cross the Kwanza River, in pursuit of UNITA forces that were fleeing from the area of operations, who were dropping their weapons in the process and avoiding serious clashes as much as possible.¹³ The intention to cross the river in order to attack UNITA bases was also opposed by MK Army Commissar Chris Hani, as a result of inadequate reconnaissance being conducted.

Apparently, what transpired was that when Chris Hani left the front, Lennox Zuma took over command and thereby ordered the MK contingent to cross the Kwanza River alongside the FAPLA units. MK elements were dispersed amongst the various FAPLA units, such that they no longer operated as a cohesive entity, as was usually the case. Consequently, problems of discipline and insubordination became salient, as MK cadres were no longer able to politically guide each other. According to the ANC, some of the members involved complained about poorly trained FAPLA troops in most of the campaigns that were undertaken and certain of the senior FAPLA commanders were considered to be inefficient in their operational planning. At certain instances, MK cadres assumed that some of the senior FAPLA commanders were deliberately failing in their planning since they were enemy agents. For example, MK cadres were involved in an ambush in which five of their comrades were killed after an engagement with UNITA forces, and none of the FAPLA combatants suffered any fatalities in the process, as they flagrantly fled the operational area. Ultimately, the inference was that MK combatants were intentionally sacrificed, by being led into predetermined ambushes.¹⁴

The consequence of these events was a reluctance from MK cadres to be involved in joint campaigns with FAPLA, and concerns began to develop regarding the necessity of being embroiled in fighting amongst Angolans, which was considered to be a conflict away from where MK expertise was really required. When a request came for a reinforced company of 140 combatants to join FAPLA on an offensive

¹² E Benard and M Twala, **Mbokodo: Inside MK-Mwezi Twala. A soldier's story** (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1994), p. 57.

¹³ African National Congress, "Stuart Commission Report 1984." **Appendices to the African National Congress policy statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission**, August 1996 (Marshalltown, Johannesburg: African National Congress), p. 17.

¹⁴ **ibid.**, pp. 17-21.

from Cacuso to Cangandala, only 104 MK cadres could be mustered. Those who were mobilised in Cangandala were also hesitant to partake in the operation as a result of improper operational planning and regarded their participation as an effort to deliberately sacrifice them. Subsequently, the situation got out of control for the commanding personnel as reports of indiscipline and insubordination resurfaced in Cacuso, Cangandala and Musafa. Ultimately, most of the cadres involved in the eastern front decided to go back to Viana camp in Luanda where the notorious mutiny began.¹⁵ According to Benard and Twala,¹⁶ the ANC leadership took a decision to involve MK in these campaigns to take the minds of the cadres away from the concerns about the bad leadership, which was done by engaging them in counter-insurgency war against UNITA.¹⁷ This view was also supported by **Africa Confidential**, which argued that the intention of involving MK forces in August 1983 was to divert their attention away from the setbacks suffered in infiltrating cadres into South Africa "because of the disruption of operational plans".¹⁸

Based on Benard and Twala's arguments, these campaigns were contemplated to achieve international acclaim for MK as a heroic force in defending Angola against Savimbi's UNITA and in co-operation with its FAPLA, Cuban and PLAN comrades.¹⁹ In contrast, however, the ANC contended that the participation of MK in the struggle on the eastern front was a response to a request made by FAPLA in Malanje province for assistance towards alleviating a deteriorating security situation, with the UNITA forces intensifying their activities in the region.²⁰ With the signing of the Lusaka Accord between Angola and South Africa in February 1984, UNITA took the opportunity to consolidate its political position and its operations in the northern part of Angola.²¹

As a response, Angolan President Eduardo dos Santos indicated, during his visit to Moscow in March 1984, that the Lusaka Accord was not aimed at reducing pressure on the racist government in South Africa from the liberation movements; rather that neither SWAPO nor the ANC should allow their armed struggles against South Africa to be undermined by the agreement.²² Besides, the accord was vitiated by South Africa's failure to reach an agreement with SWAPO in May 1984 over the fate of Namibia by insisting on the inclusion of UNITA in the settlement of the Angolan conflict. In addition, the accord was incapacitated by the clash between

¹⁵ **Loc. cit.**

¹⁶ Mwezi Twala (nom de guerre Khotso Morena) was one of the leaders of the Committee of Ten, which became the nucleus of the mutinous group.

¹⁷ Benard and Twala, pp. 57-8.

¹⁸ **Africa Confidential**, Vol. 29, No. 25, 16 December 1988.

¹⁹ Benard and Twala, pp. 57-8.

²⁰ African National Congress, p. 17.

²¹ Moorcraft, p. 194.

²² Somerville, **Southern Africa...**, p. 96.

FAPLA and the SADF's sabotage unit in the Cabinda enclave on 21 May 1985. During the engagement, captain Wynand du Toit of the SADF's 4 Recce Commando Unit was shot and captured by FAPLA, two of his colleagues were killed and six escaped. According to du Toit they had left Saldanha Bay, in the Western Cape, in a strike craft and had used inflatable boats to land in Malembo in order to sabotage oil storage tanks in the Cabinda enclave, which were operated by the Gulf Oil complex of the United States.²³

Meanwhile, in the Malanje province, MK training bases and facilities were threatened by the activities of UNITA forces that were in the vicinity - between 40 and 60 kilometres away from the camps. It therefore became necessary to take MK cadres from other camps in Quibaxe, Pango, Caxito and Luanda as well as from the frontline states to reinforce the front, and, subsequently, most of these camps were left practically uninhabited. Even those cadres who arrived from training abroad, for example those from the German Democratic Republic (the erstwhile East Germany), had to be taken directly from the airport to the eastern front. Most of the cadres, according to the ANC, greeted the challenge warmly and enthusiastically as they regarded it to be a necessary security measure that had to be undertaken. The leadership also explained to the cadres that those who were required at the home front would not be detained by their engagement in the eastern front. Therefore, the enthusiasm amongst cadres to be involved in the eastern front was influenced by the principal reason of defending MK bases and camps against an imperialist force, UNITA, which was used by the racist government in South Africa and by the Reagan administration to further their own objectives. The second motivation was the quest for some activity away from the boredom of the camps, which was primarily coupled to the need to gain combat experience. Most of these operations involved mine-defusing, laying of ambushes, raids on villages and persistent patrols. As a result, security began to improve substantially in the area of operations.²⁴

3. THE WAR IN THE SOUTH AND THE WATERSHED OF CUITO CUANAVALÉ

In Angola there were strictly two wars taking place simultaneously: "an internationalized civil war between the MPLA and UNITA, and a liberation war for Namibia. In fact the ideologies of the various combatants fused these wars into a single conflict. On one side stood the Soviet Union, Cuba, the MPLA, SWAPO and the African National Congress (ANC), who were also given bases in Angola; on the other, the United States (which restored Savimbi's funding in 1986), South Africa

²³ Moorcraft, p. 194-5.

²⁴ African National Congress. op. cit. p. 17.

and UNITA."²⁵ Angola's support for SWAPO and the ANC, as well as its socialist-orientation, placed it in perpetual military conflict with the racist government in South Africa and the Reagan administration in the United States. The 'Reagan Doctrine', espoused by US President Ronald Reagan in the October 1985 address to the UN, was aimed at countering Soviet expansionism in the Third World and this meant that the battle lines were substantially drawn between the opposing forces in Angola. According to the 'Reagan Doctrine', the Marxist-Leninist ideology created trouble spots in the Third World, and the United States was prepared to assist anti-communist forces in their struggles against Soviet domination.²⁶ Hence, both the South African government and the UNITA movement were supported by the United States to attack the Angolan state in order to force it to succumb to South Africa's hegemonic designs in the southern African region. Moreover, the intentions were to weaken the independent African states in order to perpetuate white minority rule in South Africa.²⁷

During his early 1986 visit to Washington, Jonas Savimbi received a reception worthy of a head of state, where he was hosted by President Reagan and the Secretary of State, George Schulz. He also became a keynote speaker at the annual dinner of the Republican Party in Washington. A few months after the visit, in March 1986, the Reagan administration announced that it would provide UNITA forces with covert assistance estimated at between \$15-20 million, which included TOW anti-armour missiles and Stinger and Redeye surface-to-air missiles to combat FAPLA helicopters. Such assistance was provided with the repeal of the Clark Amendment Act in July 1985, which was intended to prevent the United States from providing covert assistance to the FNLA and UNITA during the Angolan civil war.²⁸ Subsequent to the repealing of the Clark Amendment Act in 1985, the Reagan administration channelled between \$20-30 million worth of military equipment to UNITA forces in Angola, which was transported to Jamba via Zaire.²⁹ According to Horace Campbell, even before the US Congress approved assistance for UNITA, weapons had already been shipped by the CIA from a military facility in Zaire at Kamina, with the assistance of the South African and Israeli governments. Horace Campbell further alleges that this assistance was in essence a form of assistance for the SADF because UNITA did not have the military or administrative capacity to fully utilise most of the weapons supplied by the United States.³⁰ Nevertheless, UNITA's continued reliance on South Africa

²⁵ J Harding, *Small wars, small mercies* (London: Viking/Penguin, 1993), p. 7.

²⁶ KM Campbell, p. 12.

²⁷ Somerville, *Angola...*, p. 180.

²⁸ KM Campbell, pp. 12-3; Moorcraft, p. 200.

²⁹ KM Campbell, pp. 60-1.

³⁰ KM Campbell, p. 20.

impaired its diplomatic position as a legitimate rebel movement within the southern African region.³¹

In July 1987, FAPLA launched a massive military attack against UNITA positions in Mavinga.³² This offensive prompted an enormous military escalation from South Africa³³ as UNITA often operated with South African air cover and logistic support after the latter had also committed itself in 1986 that it would provide the UNITA forces with military and political assistance against the MPLA government.³⁴ Indeed, the South African government kept its promise, as it intervened to defend UNITA against the FAPLA offensive close to the north-eastern border of Namibia. The South African forces dealt a heavy military blow against FAPLA positions south of the Lomba River and thus created a difficult situation for the latter by forcing them to retreat, and pursuing and besieging them at Cuito Cuanavale. The best of FAPLA's units were in danger of being annihilated and this could have spelled disaster for the independence of Angola as well as for the success of the African revolution.³⁵

As a result, the Cuban forces who had been deployed along a defensive line at the Benguela railway were requested to offer assistance in the defence of Cuito Cuanavale because if the latter fell, the SADF would manage to take Menongue and accordingly threaten the Cuban defence line. Hence, in December 1987, the Cuban forces were committed towards halting the SADF offensive at Cuito.³⁶ In November 1987, when the SADF was focussing on seizing Cuito Cuanavale, the arrival of new Cuban forces and equipment changed the correlation of forces as well as the scene of the battle substantially.³⁷ It was even wrongly claimed that the joint FAPLA-Cuban forces in Cuito Cuanavale had MK guerrillas working as scouts to track UNITA movements, the side effect being to improve relations between the Angolan government and the ANC.³⁸ By the end of 1987, the Angolan government was spending close to 50 per cent of its budget on defence, meaning that most of the country's resources were focussed towards the war in the south.³⁹

³¹ KM Campbell, pp. 60-1.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³³ F Castro, "The battle for Angola: Fidel Castro speaks." *Sechaba* (Official Organ of the African National Congress of South Africa), Vol. 22, No. 11. November 1988, p. 2.

³⁴ KM Campbell, p. 14.

³⁵ Castro, p. 2.

³⁶ H Campbell, p. 24.

³⁷ R Palser, "Change in the balance of power." *Sechaba*, Vol. 23, No. 3. March 1989, pp. 28-9.

³⁸ *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 29, No. 14, 15 July 1988.

³⁹ H Campbell, p. 23.

The FAPLA-Cuban offensive was also being pursued in accordance with Cuban President Fidel Castro's decision of focussing on rolling back the SADF in the south and allowing UNITA to continue operating in the north. Fidel Castro believed that the possibilities for a military victory against the SADF existed, and these could project three specific objectives: firstly, it would demonstrate to the "racists" in South Africa that the Cuban armed forces were not a second-rate outfit as the generals in the SADF traditionally believed; secondly, it would neutralise the southern front in order to gain a stronger position within the ongoing negotiations between the warring parties; finally, it would increase pressure towards the liberation of Namibia.⁴⁰ The apartheid government in South Africa became concerned with this FAPLA-Cuban focus on the southern front, and particularly with the possibility that these forces could cross the Namibian border. However, during the Brazzaville talks in May 1988, the Angolan delegation promised that FAPLA would not go on the offensive across the Namibian border. Nonetheless, after the May 1988 talks, the joint FAPLA-Cuban forces began shelling the SADF-held Calueque Dam, as the SADF continued with its attempts to capture Cuito Cuanavale on 23 May 1988.

During the Cairo talks in June 1988, the joint FAPLA-Cuban forces threatened to destroy the Calueque Dam if the SADF continued to bombard Cuito Cuanavale. Ultimately, the Calueque Dam was bombarded in a devastating air and ground attack resulting in huge casualties for the SADF. The joint FAPLA-Cuban forces were now occupying most regions of the southern front from Namibe to Cuando Cubango and part of the FAPLA high command was shifted from Luanda to Lubango. This implied therefore that the SADF had lost most of the buffer zone that it had continuously occupied for more than 13 years of the war, and was only left with the territory between Cuito and the Lomba rivers and the Zambian border.⁴¹ On the other hand, as a consequence of successes being achieved in the southern front, the Angolan government embarked on a course of ensuring the withdrawal of the SADF from its territory, achieving independence for Namibia, and finally obtaining an internal solution to the UNITA problem⁴².

After failing to capture Cuito Cuanavale, the South African government was prevented from promoting UNITA's political reputation in both the Brazzaville and the Cairo military talks. The SADF generals had hoped to take Cuito Cuanavale in January 1988 and to install a UNITA provisional government there with considerable South African support, which was to be used as a bargaining chip in further military talks. Their intention was also to have Cuito Cuanavale established

⁴⁰ **Africa Confidential**, Vol. 29, No. 14, 15 July 1988.

⁴¹ **Loc. cit.**

⁴² **Africa Confidential**, Vol. 29, No. 17, 26 August 1988.

as a formidable base to launch massive operations into other towns and bases in Angola considering the infrastructure it provided for waging such operations. On the other hand, Jonas Savimbi, who was also reputed to be supportive of this stance, however, with the failure of the SADF to seize Cuito Cuanavale and the imminent successes of UNITA's guerrilla campaigns in the north, turned his attention towards the latter option.⁴³

The arrival of supplementary Cuban troops and equipment meant a substantial change in the balance of forces, as the joint FAPLA -Cuban-PLAN forces gained air and anti-aircraft superiority against the SADF-UNITA coalition. Consequently, the joint FAPLA -Cuban-PLAN forces managed not only to defend Cuito Cuanavale, but also to thrust the SADF towards the Namibian border and simultaneously outflanking them to make it suicidal for them to retreat without negotiations.⁴⁴ Since Cuito Cuanavale was chosen by the SADF as the battleground, the FAPLA -Cuban-PLAN alliance drew up a new strategy that was meant to fix the former towards this objective while the latter advanced in the western region of the southern front. The FAPLA -Cuban-PLAN forces advanced more than 250 kilometres towards the Namibian border and had to create air bases within an interval of six weeks to provide air cover for the advancing columns that ultimately engulfed the SADF-UNITA formations. Fidel Castro later commented that the objective of the FAPLA -Cuban-PLAN forces "was not to achieve a humiliating and destructive military victory over our enemy ... we were not looking for military victory, we were looking for a political, just solution to the conflict. That was the main objective, and that's why the possibilities of negotiation were not discarded..."⁴⁵

According to Horace Campbell, "Cuito Cuanavale became a turning point in the history of Southern Africa, indeed in the military history of Africa".⁴⁶ For Horace Campbell, "the defeat of the South Africans at Cuito Cuanavale combined the military defeat of apartheid with the on-going political and ideological debate over the question of the ideas of independence and African sovereignty. At different points and time in the history of humanity two different sets of ideas clash and this clash of ideas have to be fought out in the battlefield. Cuito Cuanavale was the fulcrum of the clash between the ideas of white supremacy and African liberation. The SADF was fighting to reverse the tide of history and at this juncture it could not openly mobilize external support for its cause."⁴⁷ Jan Breytenbach also agrees that "the true losers in the Cuito Cuanavale campaign were the South

⁴³ **Africa Confidential**, Vol. 29, No. 14, 15 July 1988.

⁴⁴ Palser, p. 29.

⁴⁵ Castro, Pp. 4-5.

⁴⁶ H Campbell, p. 7.

⁴⁷ **ibid.**, p. 28.

African formations and their troops who had fought heroically and magnificently without receiving the recognition that they deserved. Other losers were the badly led and trained UNITA troops who did most of the cannon fodder fighting and dying on the ground, while the South African artillery and air force were trying hard to ease their lot with long distance combat support from way behind the lines."⁴⁸

Indeed, the SADF generals preferred a UNITA force that was going to serve as a buffer against the joint FAPLA-Cuban-PLAN forces and was regarded as "an endless source of cannon-fodder".⁴⁹ Hence, the United States was attempting to woe UNITA forces from relying on South African supplies by pushing them to occupy bases in the northern part of Angola that would be backed by the Zairean government. Actually, UNITA forces were already making preparations to shift from Jamba in the south to Quimbele in the north, close to the Zairean border.⁵⁰ In 1988, for example, the United States Army dropped supplies for UNITA in the northern part of Angola in an exercise called Operation Flintlock,⁵¹ as UNITA had opened another front in the provinces of Zaire, Uige, Lunda and Cuanza Norte since 1986.⁵² During February and March 1986, UNITA forces captured three towns in the central provinces of Cuanza Norte, Uige, Huila and Lunda in which FAPLA forces were being continuously harassed,⁵³ and this was the beginning of the "northern front" in the Angolan war.

4. THE NORTHERN FRONT AND MK'S CONTRIBUTION

After the failure to capture Cuito Cuanavale and after suffering heavy casualties, UNITA forces resorted to consolidating their guerrilla warfare efforts in central and northern Angola. The United States was also conducting manoeuvres with the Zairean forces with the long-term intentions of providing UNITA forces with the necessary support to establish a base in Quimbele, north of Angola. Most of the support was to be channelled through the Zairean port of Matadi, with the intentions of threatening Angola's oil-rich Cabinda enclave.⁵⁴ The intentions of the United States' military advisors were that the UNITA forces should get re-established in northern Angola with sufficient aid to capture the major bases and towns in Luena, the capital of the Moxico province. According to this plan, also dubbed Operation Flintlock 88, UNITA forces were to be based in Quimbele under

⁴⁸ J Breytenbach, *The Buffalo soldiers: The story of South Africa's 32-Battalion, 1975-1993* (Alberton, Galago, 2002), p. 296.

⁴⁹ *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 29, No. 16, 12 August 1988.

⁵⁰ *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 29, No. 11, 27 May 1988.

⁵¹ H Campbell, p. 24.

⁵² Moorcraft, p. 202.

⁵³ W Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War 1966-1989* (Gilbratar: Ashanti, 1989), p. 141.

⁵⁴ *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 29, No. 11, 27 May 1988.

cover of joint US-Zairean exercises, with enormous armaments being supplied from Kitona, Kincuso, Kimpese, Kahemba, Dilolo and Kamina bases close to the Angolan border. UNITA forces also began acquiring white soldiers, who were believed to be US-recruited mercenaries to undertake specialised operations.⁵⁵

The option for establishing headquarters in the north, in Quimbele, was seen by other factions within UNITA as being problematic and, to a certain extent, fatal, since the movement was going to be deprived of artillery and air support that had only been provided by the SADF. Moreover, concerns were raised about dependence on the United States as a mutable ally, since the term of the Reagan administration was coming to an end. Fears raised were based on the possibilities that if George Bush was elected as president, he could opt for developing better relations with Luanda than his predecessor had done.⁵⁶ In addition, UNITA leaders were also concerned as the Angolan government had threatened to launch an invasion into the Zairean Shaba province if the government of Mobutu Sese Seko was seen to be supporting UNITA. Nevertheless, these concerns were rooted in the United States' infirm commitment to risk the destabilisation of Zaire, as a key regionally ally, on UNITA's behalf.⁵⁷

When the SADF could not move forward at the southern front, UNITA had no other option but to attack further north to ensure the sustainability of the northern front. All forces in Angola were therefore forced into battle. For instance, UNITA managed to capture Muhango since FAPLA had placed all its efforts into the confrontation with the SADF in the south. SWAPO got engaged in the battles in Cuito, while MK guerrillas clashed with UNITA elements at Malanje and Uige.⁵⁸ With the UNITA forces adopting the United States-designed northern option under Operation Flintlock 88, it implied that the movement was slowly distancing itself from South Africa. The United States was also reported to have trained approximately 60 UNITA explosive experts alongside the Nicaraguan Contras in Central America.⁵⁹

The Angolan government, on the other hand, placed the northern front in the hands of major Matias Coelho Mzumbi, who counted largely on the support of the local population that had little regard for UNITA forces and were continuously reporting their movements to the Angolan authorities. Mzumbi was also relying on counter-insurgency operations carried out by MK forces from their training bases in the

⁵⁵ **Africa Confidential**, Vol. 29, No. 14, 15 July 1988.

⁵⁶ **Africa Confidential**, Vol. 29, No. 16, 12 August 1988.

⁵⁷ **Africa Confidential**, Vol. 29, No. 17, 26 August 1988.

⁵⁸ H Campbell, p. 24.

⁵⁹ **Africa Confidential**, Vol. 29, No. 16, 12 August 1988.

north and some who had been moved north from Luanda.⁶⁰ MK commanders involved in the northern front included Chris Hani and Timothy Mokoena, who was seriously wounded in an engagement in 1988.⁶¹ Timothy Mokoena was later in the same year promoted to become MK Army Commissar in the place of Steve Tshwete, who was moved to co-head the newly created Internal Political Committee (IPC) with Ronnie Kasrils. The IPC was established in Lusaka to reinforce the efforts of Mac Maharaj, Sphiwe Nyanda and others to strengthen the underground structures inside South Africa.⁶²

UNITA forces on the northern front were engaged in cutting roads and transport, blowing up supply dumps and sabotaging government facilities in Luanda, the area north of Luanda and the Malanje, Huambo and Bie provinces.⁶³ According to Africa Confidential, France's secret service (Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (DGSE)) was providing training in sabotage to UNITA combatants at Cercottes in France.⁶⁴ These UNITA members were posing as Zaireans in order to save embarrassment for the French government and this training had been taking place since 1984, with the involvement of ADERI, a Paris-based organisation that had links with the racist government in South Africa. There are also possibilities that ADERI was involved in the assassination of the ANC chief representative in Paris, Dulcie September, since the editor of ADERI's pro-apartheid newsletter, the **Courrier Austral Parlementaire**, served in the Interior Ministry and was responsible for renewing September's resident permit. The newsletter's editor, Jean Taousson, was also associated with the former leaders and supporters of French Algeria, who were responsible for the formation of ADERI.

On 10 October 1988, UNITA forces claimed to have killed 61 FAPLA combatants in ambushes, which included 28 that were killed in Ucuca. According to UNITA, four armoured vehicles were knocked out and another 20 were also damaged during an attack on a convoy in the east of the Lunda province.⁶⁵ Actually these were attacks against joint FAPLA -MK convoys that were moving logistic supplies from Luanda to the various camps and villages in the north of Luanda. The camps and villages included Pango camp, Camps 13 and 32 in Quibaxe, the forward military base in Quibaxe town, and the various front bases in Pareta village, Phiri and Ucuca towns alongside the route from Luanda, Caxito and to Uige. UNITA forces were able to carry out these attacks with the backing of Zairean President Mobutu Sese

⁶⁰ **Africa Confidential**, Vol. 29, No. 11, 27 May 1988.

⁶¹ H Barrell, p. 54.

⁶² **ibid.**, pp. 64-5.

⁶³ **Africa Confidential**, Vol. 29, No. 14, 15 July 1988.

⁶⁴ **Africa Confidential**, Vol. 29, No. 15, 29 July 1988.

⁶⁵ Steenkamp, p. 174.

Seko, who in turn was aided by the United States and getting advice from the French general, Jeannon Lacaze.⁶⁶

UNITA attacks against the ANC in Angola were based on the perspectives shared by conservatives in the United States towards the liberation movement, especially if these attacks were placed within the greater context of discrediting the ANC as a communist-inspired terrorist organisation in the eyes of the American public.⁶⁷ The Reagan administration's support for UNITA and the shifting of its headquarters to Quimbele, close to the Zairean border, was partly motivated by the intention to ultimately remove MK bases that were located in the northern part of Angola. The presumption here is that the selection of the town of Quimbele was also caused by the need to establish a UNITA presence in the proximity of MK facilities and bases so as to make it impossible for the latter to continue with its normal military training.

It is also possible that according to the concordant prognoses of the UNITA, SADF and United States leadership, MK was anticipated to fail to absorb heavy casualties within its ranks, considering the experiences on the eastern front. With heavy casualties being meted out on a continuous basis alongside the Luanda to Uige route through continuous harassing ambushes, MK combatants were expected to be mutinous against their leadership as they had done in 1984. The contemplation was that it could lead to an unmanageable situation in the north that would also allow UNITA to operate freely against FAPLA and ultimately control the route from the north to Luanda. With the capital being threatened, the joint FAPLA-Cuban-PLAN forces could be distracted from their focus on the southern front and be overstretched to contain the situation. Nevertheless, the morale and enthusiasm of the Young Lions Detachment of MK who were essentially involved in the northern front was remarkably amazing. Despite the huge losses that MK suffered and the difficult conditions of operating within an unfamiliar territory, these combatants fought gallantly in defence of Angola.

Jan Breytenbach alleges that general opinion within the SADF towards MK was that the latter did not match the calibre of its SWAPO counterparts, as even international experts, such as those within the British Army, considered MK to be "the most 'ineffective liberation army in the world'".⁶⁸ According to Breytenbach, the strong points of MK combatants "were politics and 'psywar' coupled with their

⁶⁶ **Africa Confidential**, Vol. 29, No. 11, 27 May 1988.

⁶⁷ See for instance TJ Redden (Jr.), "The US Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986: Anti-apartheid or anti-African National Congress?", **African Affairs: Journal of the Royal African Society**, Vol. 87, No. 349, October 1988, pp. 595-605.

⁶⁸ Breytenbach, p. 334.

ability to intimidate, incite and politically mobilise the masses".⁶⁹ Obviously, the nature of training that was emphasised within MK was the ability of cadres to reproduce themselves within the masses and to produce soldiers with an understanding of the nature of the revolution they were engaged in, and to harness these forces towards people's war. The emphasis here is that MK combatants were mostly geared towards guerrilla warfare, and should have the ability to recruit revolutionary soldiers from the working people and the peasantry, who would ultimately overthrow apartheid and lead the process towards the establishment of a non-racial democracy in South Africa. Nevertheless, despite the odds of being deployed within an intricate environment, they proved themselves as capable soldiers in the counter-insurgency campaigns that were undertaken on the northern front. MK cadres achieved gigantic successes in suppressing and routing UNITA forces within Angola's northern provinces and were able to co-operate effectively with the Angolan population within the towns and villages wherein they were engaged.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The significance of MK's involvement in the defence of Angola is that it defended the route from the then Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) to Luanda, which was vulnerable to joint UNITA-SADF-CIA forces and could have allowed them to destabilise the capital, Luanda. Accordingly, MK managed to play a strategic role in stifling what was probably a well-orchestrated effort by the UNITA-SADF-CIA forces to stretch the joint FAPLA-Cuban-PLAN forces along two fronts, in the north and the south of Angola. The opening of the northern front by the UNITA-SADF-CIA forces was deliberate, since these forces were suffering huge losses on the southern front. They therefore opted to open the northern front in order to threaten and ultimately take over the capital, Luanda, and accordingly cut off the joint FAPLA-Cuban-PLAN forces from their main supply source, which could have finally resulted in the latter's annihilation.

However, as a consequence of a steadfast conviction to defend Angola, as the "firm trench of the African revolution", MK as an internationalist force, in conjunction with FAPLA, Cuban and PLAN forces, played a critical role in promoting the success of the African revolution in Angola, Namibia and ultimately South Africa. Even though the contribution made by MK could be regarded as "infinitesimal", since it was not adequately documented in the past, it was however significant in terms of allowing the joint FAPLA-Cuban-PLAN forces to focus their entire attention on the main force attacking from the south. Hence they managed to

⁶⁹ **Loc. cit.**

achieve victory at Cuito Cuanavale and accordingly ensured the success of the African revolution in Namibia and South Africa. Moreover, these operations gave MK cadres valuable battlefield experience⁷⁰ that they could use in their future military encounters.

Subsequent to the war, regional peace initiatives brought about the closure of most MK base facilities in Angola in 1989 and the majority of MK cadres were moved to Tanzania and Uganda. Such a move diverted most of MK's resources and energies away from the home front as the Frontline States also indicated their full support for a negotiated settlement. Pressures on the ANC to agree to a negotiated settlement included amongst other things the revision of Soviet policy towards regional conflicts, especially in southern Africa, which maintained that such conflicts could be resolved by negotiations. This was despite the fact that the Soviet Union had made it clear that it had no designs or intentions concerning the region. In addition, the negotiations towards Namibia's independence also confirmed that possibilities existed for a negotiated settlement in South Africa between the ANC and the racist government.⁷¹ Nevertheless, even though the ANC was not compelled to seek a negotiated settlement, as it continued with the armed struggle as planned and continued to receive support from the Frontline States, the South African question was ultimately solved through political negotiations in the early 1990s.

⁷⁰ Barrell, p. 54.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 66.