REPORT ON A VISIT TO ANGOLA
(February 1-10, 1981)

I have just returned from a visit to Angola with an international commission which met to hear evidence of South African aggression against Angola, other front-line states and the people of Namibia and South Africa.

I was asked to attend as an observer for Southern Africa magazine, but was able also to gather information and impressions of particular value to the Africa Fund and ACOA, in a broad range of discussions with Angolan government and MPLA party members, senior liberation movement representatives from SWAPO and the ANC and many "ordinary" Angolans. Their energy and enthusiasm for the incredibly difficult task of reconstruction seemed, to my rather jaded New York eye, very extra-ordinary.

The Commission Sessions

The International Commission of Inquiry into the Crimes of the Racist and Apartheid Regimes in Southern Africa met in Angola from January 30th to 3rd February. Established following the Soweto uprising, it is composed of well-known individuals from a broad range of countries and political perspectives. The 27 members at the Luanda meeting included the Chairman, Nobel prize winner Sean MacBride, former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark, several churchmen and leading legal personalities from East and West Europe, Scandinavia, Africa, and Asia.

After hearing all the evidence the Commission concluded that South Africa was conducting a secret war against Angola, and had created a situation throughout southern Africa in which it not only constituted a threat to international peace, but was constantly breaching that peace by its violent acts of aggression. Strong action should be taken against South Africa under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, MacBride told an intent audience, which included several hundred Angolans, at the concluding session of the hearings. Such action was urgent, said MacBride, because South African acts of aggression ... torture ... massacre of African people ... equaled the worst done by the Nazis during the war.

We saw and heard much proof of this strong assertion as evidence was presented of systematic attacks being launched against Angola from the illegally occupied territory of Namibia by South African troops and mercenaries.
A small group of Commission members flew down to Cunene province in southern Angola to observe conditions in the major combat zone. Presenting their findings Ramsey Clark reported, "We flew ... to a town called Xangongo and then proceeded south by trucks and jeeps to maybe 10-20 kilometers of the Namibian border. We found generally there what could be called a state of war. There was a constant military presence and alertness of a defensive nature, networks of trenches and bunkers and reports of daily depredations by South African military personnel ... apparently daily use of military aircraft, jets with rockets and heavy gunfire capacity, and helicopter fleets which come in under heavy fire cover, land and make assaults into the sovereign territory of Angola." Clark described one such attack, reported while the group was in the area. "An automobile fired upon. Who was in it? Seven nuns."

Assessing what he termed "the method in this madness" Clark pointed to the similarities with the American bombing of Cambodia ... which had also been secret to much of the world, although the Cambodians were aware of it. "It's hard not to be when you feel the concussions and bury the bodies," he said.

The first purpose was to drive the population from the area by terror and starvation. "It is an area that can support herds of cattle, goats, hogs. We saw dozens of carcasses of cattle that can feed people, nourish children, dead." More generally the war presented an enormous economic drain on the resources of a new government, absorbing the strength of an army "that could be employed in social development, economic development and caring for the children of the land." Finally, he said, the tactic was also aimed at preventing Namibians from fleeing to freedom.

The Angolan government added detailed evidence about the escalating intensity of the South African attacks. In the 18 months between June 1979 and December 1980 at least 400 Angolan civilians were killed, "640 civilians wounded, 85 FAPLA soldiers killed, and unknown number of dead and wounded Namibian refugees" said the official Angolan report, which also described extensive damage inflicted on agriculture, industry, transport, and the whole social fabric in southern Angola.

The Mercenaries

The most vivid description of South Africa's war came from a Black Angolan deserter, Jose Ricardo Belmundo, who had spent over four years in a special SA army unit specifically established to operate in Angola. He highlighted the collusion between regular and special S.A. army forces and so-called UNITA units, and the extensive use of Black and white mercenaries in search and destroy type missions designed to create an empty desert along the Namibia-Angola border.
Belmundo was born in Angola in 1953. His parents fled Portuguese colonialism in 1961, settling in Zaire. There he joined Holden Roberto's FNLA in 1973, fought with them against MPLA and eventually joined up with the South Africans. He had risen to the rank of Captain in SA Defense Force Battalion 32, before deserting to Angola in January 1980. Wearing a distinctive camouflage uniform, with Buffalo insignia, he told the Commission that the 32nd Battalion was comprised of men of many nationalities, including French, British and others. But its major strength came from the 9000 former FNLA soldiers. When FNLA and the South Africans were defeated in Angola in late 1975 many FNLA soldiers retreated with the South Africans. They were disarmed, and eventually incorporated into the Buffalo Battalion as a special intervention unit - a mercenary unit under South African army command.

In 1976 Belmundo was one of a group of 32 men sent from the Buffalo Battalion for special commando training at a base near Durban. Later he was one of a group of 80 in an officer's training course in Pretoria. While there he met Mozambicans, Zimbabweans, Zambians and other men from front-line states, who were all being trained to carry out special insurgency type operations in their home countries.

Describing operations in which he had been involved Belmundo said "During 1978 and 1979 we led small units in carrying out "cleaning up" operations against the People's Republic of Angola .... we had precise instructions to destroy schools, hospitals, houses and to wipe out civilian population and kill cattle."

When Buffalo units were operating inside Angola they did not use standard South African uniforms or equipment, but were for instance given Chinese-made weapons, "so that the Angolan government would think we were UNITA."

Asked about 32nd Battalion relationships with UNITA, Belmundo responded that the two groups had different spheres of action, but were working for the same bosses. When UNITA had operational difficulties however, it would contact the South African military security personnel, and units from the 32nd Battalion would be sent to give assistance.

American Involvement

At a press conference following the Commission hearings I asked Belmundo whether he knew of US mercenaries involved in the 32nd Battalion. His response was startling. Colonel Carpenter, the man who in 1975 led some of the South African forces into Angola, and was later responsible for setting up the Buffalo Battalion was an American veteran who had fought in Zaire and Vietnam.
Two other US connections emerged during the Commission sessions. Belmundo testified that the 155 mm cannons (for which Space Research had supplied South Africa with at least 50,000 shells, plus technology enabling it to manufacture its own equipment) had been used as tactical weapons in some of the larger-scale land attacks in which he had participated. Finally I made a close scrutiny of the captured military equipment displayed for the Commission, and found that a light machine gun, which had belonged to a South African pilot shot down over Angola was of US origin, stamped American International Corporation, SLC, Utah.

**Torture and Terror**

Two major themes dominated the evidence presented to the Commission. First South African aggression against front lines states, which focused mainly on the war against Angola, and second "aggression against people struggling for their liberation."

Listeners during the sessions dealing with this second theme were visibly shaken by the unemotional, detailed and horrible testimony given by several members of both SWAPO and the African National Congress about their personal experiences.

Rauna Nambinga, a young Namibian nurse, who had joined SWAPO in 1973 told the Commission that she had first been arrested on September 17th, 1975 at the hospital where she worked. She was interrogated at Ogongo Detention Camp, by military and civilian police who accused her of having supplied medicine and money to SWAPO freedom fighters; weeks of beatings and solitary confinement followed. Once, for a week she was not allowed access to a toilet. "The most terrible day I remember," she said in a still, small voice, "was when I was taken to a small room ... there were many pictures of dead people on the wall. They told me one ... was my brother, Usko Nambinga, so I must show them which one ...." Because she could not comply she was again beaten and "from there I was taken to a room where there were snakes and I was told that if I was not going to start telling the truth I was going to be bitten .... I was in a great panic ...." Eventually brought to trial she was convicted of helping people who aimed at the violent overthrow of the government and sentenced to a jail term, which she served in South Africa.

On her release in 1977 she returned to Namibia, and was again detained in 1980. This time she was subjected to electric torture, prolonged hanging, and such severe beatings that a military doctor who examined her told her that she had serious head and kidney injuries, and burst ear-drumns. Released, after months of detention in solitary confinement, she was then approached by three policemen who asked her to work with them. Afraid for her life if she refused, she finally fled from Namibia.
Herman Ithete, SWAPO Deputy Secretary for Legal Affairs, described the campaign of terror being waged against the Namibian people by the South Africans. He enumerated cases where groups of South African infantry had deliberately gone out on raping parties, listing dates, names, places. He described the operations of small gangs of kidnappers, code-named "Koevoet" squads, which specialize in the abduction of known SWAPO supporters. He read a long list of names of men and women who had disappeared without trace, and who, it was feared, might be dead.

He described how the work of the "Koevoet" gangs is complemented by the operations of the so-called Special Constable Units and Tribal Home Guards, which specialize in hunting down civilians aiding SWAPO.

Ithete also referred to a new technique being used by the South Africans: the training of young women whose task it was to spy on and seduce SWAPO members and guerillas, poison or betray them. Several such women had been discovered in Angola. The two who testified to the Commission are now in a SWAPO refugee camp.

War, terror and South African brutality have made many Namibians refugees. There are, according to SWAPO and the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees at least 50,000 Namibian refugees in Angola, and South Africa's new plan to conscript all black Namibian youths into the army is bringing out a new wave of young people.

Along with several Commission members I visited a major SWAPO refugee camp, several hundred kilometers inland from Luanda. Deliberately inaccessible, to protect it from South African attack, the camp faces enormous problems. Some 25,000 people, mainly women and children, live in neatly organized tent villages. There is a SWAPO farm — but most food has to be trucked in, over a road that is little more than a badly rutted track. The site was chosen because it is relatively free from the ubiquitous, malaria-carrying mosquito, but that means it is also quite far from water, which has to be fetched from a nearby river, because there has not been sufficient money to install a pumping system.

The camp is divided into sections, and I visited both the school and hospital areas. The school camp cares for at least 9000 children, with more coming daily. There are only about 60 teachers, and although extra adults help with food preparation and the very young, the children are encouraged to take responsibility for one another. As I wandered around I constantly saw the older boys and girls reach out to help the smaller children.

It was Sunday, so no classes, usually held under the trees, were in session, but teachers were eager to talk about needs. There is a shortage of everything, exercise and text books, slates, chalk, blackboards. A map or globe is a luxury not to be dreamed of until
each child has a pencil and paper. But no one seemed down-hearted; children are learning to read and write for the first time in their lives, and when they talked about their hopes they seemed sure that ahead of them lay many possibilities, not just the narrow track of twenty years of unskilled labor.

When we arrived we were greeted by Nangolo Mbumba, the young principal of the school, who had himself recently graduated from the University of Connecticut. He led us up a long track lined with singing children and teenagers, then gathered them all in a vast circle to introduce us, the commission members. Carefully he explained why we had come, representing people around the world who supported their struggle. Then, in a moving gesture, he led forward the Zimbabwean member of our mission. Students and teachers alike gave him a tumultuous welcome, greeting him as the symbol of their belief that freedom can and will be won.

The camp has a small, simple hospital, several small rooms filled with beds and very little else. But already there is a training program for nurses, and Iyambo Indango, one of the first Namibians to qualify as a Doctor, and now the head of SWAPO's medical service, showed us the x-ray unit, and the very basic surgical theatre. He explained that the camp is only two years old and still growing rapidly. Sometimes there are so many new arrivals that people have to sleep under the trees; often there are not enough blankets; sometimes food and water run out. People are often weak when they arrive, having walked hundreds of kilometers. They have little resistance to diseases such as malaria and typhoid.

There are over 1000 pregnant women in the camp, and more than 2000 babies. These need special food and there are pitifully few resources to meet all the needs - not even enough diapers.

As we walked around, young and old came to walk with us, asking us questions, proudly pointing out new achievements - a new classroom, a large charcoal cooler. Often they talked about the importance of the help friends from outside had already given them - seeing it not only in terms of physical needs, but also as an expression of human solidarity.

Supporting the Liberation Struggle

Listening to the witnesses, travelling in the countryside, talking to people in the streets of Luanda, everywhere it was impossible to ignore the fact that Angola is a country under constant attack, and that the war is placing severe strains on the young state as it seeks to reconstruct its shattered economy for the benefit of the many rather than the few. Yet nowhere did I detect signs of wavering support for the struggle of the people of Namibia or South Africa; no one ever suggested that Angola was paying too high a price. Speaking at the 20th Anniversary of the beginning of armed struggle on
February 4th, President Eduardo dos Santos expressed Angola's solidarity with that struggle, and with the people of Mozambique, who had just been subjected to a vicious military attack by South African military forces. We are united in the same trench, he told a crowd of thousands. We will continue our support for all forms of Namibian struggle, including the armed struggle.

I stayed on in Angola for several days after the conclusion of the Commission. Although my trip had developed at short notice, so that no planning could be done in advance, I found men and women within the MPLA party structure and the government eager to help me as much as possible in the short time available. People came to talk to me wherever I went, whether walking through Luanda streets, or visiting a coffee plantation in a small town in Cuanza North, or partying with several hundred Angolans celebrating the twenty year anniversary of the beginning of armed struggle.

In my halting Portuguese I talked with old combatents, in their distinguishing black uniforms, men who had fought with MPLA since the beginning of armed struggle in 1961. And young FAPLA soldiers, including Julia, a woman in her early 20's, very proud of her combat role. I talked with youthful administrative officials, with workers in Luanda and the countryside, with very political people and with some who cared little about politics. The only barrier was language, my Portuguese is poor and very few people speak English.

But I was constantly struck by the openness with which people discussed Angola's problems, economic and political. No one tried to "cover up" difficulties. On several occasions I heard groups of men debating, very hotly, issues such as the correct balance between agricultural and industrial development, problems of bureaucratisation and elitism, even within the party, questions about the linkages between party and state and other such issues. Perhaps for me the most disappointing aspect of this was that the discussions were always amongst men. I rarely saw women participating.

There are certainly tremendous problems. The war is a constant and terrible drain which is absorbing not only money, but also far too many precious people. Everywhere I went I heard about the great shortage of trained "cadre" and when Angolans speak of cadre they mean not only people with political training but also with technical and administrative skills. Far too many of these are in the army. They have to be there, because Angola's very survival depends on the ability of its army to turn back the constant South African attacks.
Angola is potentially a rich country. It has minerals, water, fine agricultural potential. But today it is struggling to rebuild the limited productive capacity developed under Portuguese colonialism. In many places industrial production ground almost to a halt after independence as everyone who knew anything about process and procedures abandoned Angola for Portugal, carrying with them many bits of vital equipment, and often disabling what was left behind. Factories are working again, often with the help of some foreign technicians; now the task is to train more and more Angolans and a constant theme is the need for each worker to feel responsible for what he or she does.

But problems of industrial worker productivity are closely linked to another critical issue, the need to rebuild agricultural output, which has also been very severely reduced. Workers in big cities like Luanda often have money but nothing to spend it on, because little surplus food is being produced and because severe transport problems prevent what is grown from getting where it is needed. Thus absenteeism in factories is a serious problem, as people acquire what goods they can and take off into the countryside to trade them for food.

Agricultural development is obviously core to Angola's economic reconstruction; it involves dealing with a number of complex issues. Many Angolans are still subsistent farmers, growing barely enough for themselves, only occasionally a little over for trade and taxes under the Portuguese. That agriculture was badly disrupted by the years of war against the Portuguese, and by the South African invasion of 1975 and many hundreds of thousands of peasants are only now beginning to re-establish their output. Large scale production for both city food and for export, such as coffee, cotton, sugar, maize, cattle, was mainly Portuguese controlled and it too, like industry, was badly damaged with the Portuguese departure. Now new ways are being developed to reconstruct and expand agricultural production in both sectors. Angola is still being forced to import much food; foreign businessmen involved in the trade, in Luanda, commonly quote a figure of $500 million worth of food imports for 1980. But there are signs that the process of deterioration has been stopped. I visited a medium-sized coffee plantation in Cuanza North which probably typifies what is happening in many areas of Angola. The former plantation is now run as a state owned farm; it has 300 workers who have their own committee and share responsibility for the farm. Representatives from this committee and the government administration walked and drove about the very beautiful estate with me, proudly showing what was being done to rebuild for the future. We looked at the newly established tree nursery, (coffee takes seven years
to come into production,) and at projects like a large fish pond, designed to provide food. Afterwards we talked for a long time about problems and goals. Local administrative responsables shared with me statistics about increasing production, about the rate at which goals were being achieved and about projected outputs, also talked about the difficulties in continuing to expand production.

That pattern, the realistic assessment of problems, the enthusiastic discussion of actual progress and future plans was one that shaped many of the meetings I had in Angola. Thus when I talked with Maria Josegama, national secretary for information of OMA, the Angolan Woman's Organization, she traced for me the progress that had been made in organizing Angolan women who had been, she said, the victims of a double oppression, colonialism and the obscurantism and constrictions within traditional African society. She talked about intensive programs of alphabeticization, which had already reached one million women since independence, she pointed proudly to the fact that there were already four women on the central committee of MPLA and one Minister in the government, and then went on to talk about the great difficulties facing women, particularly in the rural areas, as they attempted to establish organizations.

I had expected that people might treat me with hostility coming from the United States, a country so closely associated with the forces that have worked hardest to destroy the young state. In fact Angolans clearly understood that there could be profound differences between the entities of the government and the people of the United States. They were eager to understand what was happening politically in the United States, and were naturally particularly concerned about the increasingly hostile direction of administration policy toward Angola. I had a long discussion with the senior MPLA official in charge of external relations for the party, who expressed to me Angola's willingness to establish diplomatic relations with the United States. He too stressed the concern that was felt about the possibility that the United States would join in an escalation of aggressive actions and aid to UNITA already being carried out by South Africa. We do not fear to have friendly relations with the United States, he said, but at the same time we will also not accept any US policy impositions on us as the price for such relations.

Jennifer Davis
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