From November 12-17 I had the opportunity to travel to the People's Republic of Angola on behalf of the American Committee on Africa. I represented ACOA as a delegate to an International Conference of Youth and Students in Solidarity with the Peoples, Youth and Students of Southern Africa held November 13-15 in Luanda.

The event was organized at the request of SWAPO of Namibia and the ANC of South Africa by a preparatory Committee of international youth and student groups in cooperation with the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid and UNESCO. It was a follow-up to a similar 1979 World Youth Conference held in Paris and a 1980 International Seminar involving over 60 groups in Stockholm.

The November 13-15 event was hosted by the JMPLA--the youth organization of the governing MPLA party of labor--and attended by 166 delegates representing over 100 national and international organizations.

The conference was a valuable political experience for several reasons:

1) It was an opportunity to exchange information with a broad range of solidarity groups from Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Mideast and Asia. Hearing of the particular character of campaigns was useful and in light of the universal criticism of U.S. policy it was important that I (and the three other Americans there) was able to inform people of the widespread and grassroots U.S. support for the liberation struggle, particularly among students in the U.S. I was able to distribute a considerable amount of ACOA literature which was extremely well-received. Many of the activists, though well informed, did not have access to the statistical information and details of US collaboration with South Africa that we can provide. They also expressed interest in receiving the type of brief, widely-distributable publications listed in the literature list.

2) At the Conference there were numerous presentations by the ANC and SWAPO, including major addresses by Alfred Nzo, Secretary General of the ANC, and Sam Nujoma, President of SWAPO. These provided me with a concrete picture of the liberation movement activities in southern Africa, and underlined the importance that the liberation movements attach to youth solidarity work.

3) The Angolan Government attached a great deal of importance to the conference. This was demonstrated by the participation of Paulo Jorge, Minister of Foreign Affairs, in the conference and of other high ranking officials. One particularly important aspect of the conference was an evening in solidarity with the People of Angola at which an officer in the Armed Forces gave a detailed presentation of the South African invasion of southern Angola.

4) The deliberations and outcome of the conference reflected the widespread and solid support for SWAPO and the ANC and underlined the leading role being played by the ANC in the struggle for a free South Africa.

More...
5) The final documents of the Conference also emphasized several other points, namely:

a) That the U.S. is South Africa's major ally and has pushed for inclusion of South Africa in a South Atlantic Treaty Organization as an adjunct to NATO which includes Latin American dictatorships.

b) The importance of international sanctions against South Africa. Work for sanctions of course takes different concrete forms. In the U.S. it currently takes the form of divestment campaigns while in places like Denmark it is more focused on consumer boycotts and trade union actions opposing the shipment of military and other material to South Africa.

c) The crucial need to support the People's Republic of Angola against South African aggression. (Upon request we will provide groups with copies of the conference document on supporting Angola)

d) Developments in southern Africa must be understood in the context of global imperialist strategy. Thus the conference emphasized support of the struggle against imperialism on all fronts and singled out in particular the struggles for national and social liberation being waged in Western Sahara, Palestine, East Timor and El Salvador.

Other Meetings

Apart from the formal conference proceedings I had an opportunity to get a first-hand though brief view of Angola, as well as engage in discussions with SWAPO and the ANC.

What was impressive about the Angolans was how solidly they support the liberation struggle in southern Africa despite the high price they must pay for such solidarity. As one comrade from the ANC said: "Angola is the first trench of revolution in Africa".

A concrete sign of that support came on the last day of the conference when we attended a commemoration with hundreds of Angolan youth of a monument to the children of Soweto. Alfred Nzo spoke for the ANC in expressing his gratitude for the support Angola has given their struggle.

The day after the conference I met with Moses Garoeb, Administrative Secretary of SWAPO. We talked about the very serious situation in southern Angola and then discussed a U.S. speaking tour of SWAPO in spring 1982.

In our general discussion Mr. Garoeb made the following points:

1) The primary objective of South Africa's invasion in August was to destroy or seriously cripple SWAPO's operations. There was initially some defensive actions by SWAPO, but thereafter SWAPO forces disengaged and the South Africans inflicted little damage. South Africa thus failed in its primary objective.

2) South Africa's second major objective was to establish a "buffer zone" in the south under UNITA control. South Africa did take over 5-7 towns and for the first time the South African flag was raised in Angola. However, fierce resistance by the Angolan armed forces drove the South Africans back in some places and prevented them from going further north. The second objective was thus not achieved either—although continuing South African attacks in southern Angola indicate that this goal has not been abandoned.

Though the South African invasion did not fulfill its major objectives, it did succeed in creating a vast number of refugees which has placed a heavy burden on the Angolan Government. Mr. Garoeb did point out that some of SWAPO's infrastructure was disrupted initially, but that since then SWAPO's military capacity has grown. This capacity is not limited to the area north of Windhoek—the "official military operational area"—but has grown in southern Namibia where attacks are directed mostly against economic infrastructures (bridges, rail lines, etc).
Ironically, South Africa's "propoganda" actions following the Angolan invasion helped bolster confidence in SWAPO among the Namibian population. For example, to show that it had incapacitated SWAPO, South Africa publicly displayed an immense amount of hardware such as tanks and anti-missile units that were supposedly captured from SWAPO strongholds in Angola. This exhibition in Windhoek, far from deflating public confidence in SWAPO, boosted it since such sophisticated weaponry was evidence of SWAPO's military capability! South Africa closed the exhibition once it saw the public reaction.

At the end of our discussion Mr. Garoeb agreed that SWAPO would make someone available for a U.S. speaking tour in Spring 1982 in conjunction with the Weeks of National Action (March 21-April 4). This SWAPO representative would come from Angola and we will receive confirmation of the details shortly. All groups who are interested in having a SWAPO speaker between mid-March and mid-April should contact us immediately since demand will be high.

Mr. Garoeb also gave me a detailed list of all of SWAPO's material aid needs, with particular reference to their educational project in Angola. The list covers everything from books to jeeps, and those who are interested in working on SWAPO material aid should contact us if you have questions about the sort of material to collect, and practical ways to handle materials that have been collected. Please contact us for technical advice before initiating any campaign.

Conclusion

It was a very useful trip, and the specific plan for a SWAPO speaking tour should help give more focus to the Weeks of Action. I learned a great deal about activities of international solidarity groups, and was able to pass on much useful information about U.S. solidarity work. Being in Angola gave me a real sense of the difficult conditions imposed by the war there for which our own country shares so much of the blame.