



Orde Eliasov/Lank

Occupational burden: Unita soldier on patrol in southern Angola

In The Buffer Zone

A deadline of September 22 has now been set for a peace settlement in south-western Africa, involving the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola and of South Africa's occupying forces from Namibia, and bringing Namibia to independence under UN Resolution 435.

That, at least, is the date proposed by Washington. By no coincidence, the US presidential campaign will then be in full swing. It thus places American priorities in the talks within a clearly domestic political context. So it would not be too surprising if the other main parties to the negotiations - Pretoria, Luanda and Havana - saw no special reason to slot into such a rapid timetable to sign, seal and start to deliver on peace for the region.

Nevertheless it seems conditions may now exist for a breakthrough, which, if it were finally to be achieved, would comprehensively restructure the whole setting for the battle for South Africa itself.

The result of an early deal would be that Namibia would be effectively neutralised as a potential base for anti-apartheid action, and especially for any ANC military presence. US officials openly if unattributably proclaim Pretoria will have the right to punitive, 'hot-pursuit' operations into post-independence Namibia. Further secret financial and military guarantees for Pretoria may well lie on the table, or at least under it.

To put it bluntly, at a Lancaster House-style independence conference, Swapo would be in no strong position to resist highly restrictive provisions which are likely to be sought by the US, West Germany, Canada, France and Britain, the original sponsors in 1978 of UN Resolution 435 under which Namibia was supposed to reach independence within 12 months.

Such provisions could include some or all of the following: clauses effectively preventing a Swapo government taking measures to wrest the economy from Pretoria's grip, ensuring continued (and finally legal) Western exploitation of its rich deposits of uranium and hydrocarbons, entrenching constitutional rights for Namibia's white farmers, and allowing continued South African occupation of the Walvis Bay naval enclave. Almost certainly the West would seek an effective demilitarisation of Namibia, whereby no foreign military forces (and especially not Cubans) would be allowed on its soil, and the development of a carefully controlled new Namibian army.

This is precisely the sort of solution that the US has been pursuing under Reagan and Chester Crocker, the US under-secretary of state for southern Africa and one of the few senior Reagan officials to have survived throughout the presidency.

On the other side, a South African withdrawal from both southern Angola and Namibia has long been viewed by both Angola and Cuba as the essential condition that must be met if Angola is to enjoy guaranteed 'sovereignty and territorial integrity'. Such a withdrawal would deprive Pretoria's clients in the Unita movement of their crucial sources of logistical support, and Angola will be in a position, at long last, to try to rebuild its shattered economy.

What has changed to break the deadlock? The first and most important factor is Mikhail Gorbachev. Without his signature, a UN-sponsored settlement cannot be achieved. With his agreement, anything is possible.

It is difficult to imagine that UN-supervised elections would fail to return a Swapo government. Even a heavily compromised independence would, arguably, be better for Namibia than the present situation of outright and seemingly unending occupation by the forces of apartheid. Certainly such a settlement would be a huge relief

to Angola. Such may be among the calculations motivating Moscow.

The second factor is military. Since last October, when the South Africans mounted a major offensive to install themselves and Unita in the strategic southern town of Cuito Cuanavale, an unprecedented counter-offensive by the Cubans and Angolans has now brought them to within a few miles of the Namibian border, where a powerfully defended airfield is being constructed that will presumably end South Africa's previously uncontested control of the local skies.

And whereas before Chester Crocker's policy of 'linkage' effectively legitimised South African occupation of both Namibia and the southern reaches of Angola by equating this to the 40,000-

strong Cuban troop presence in Angola; now that Havana, Luanda and Moscow appear to be open to the idea of a trade-off, Pretoria is coming under growing US pressure to fall into line with a scheme which is designed, after all, to enhance its own long-term security.

As the diplomatic haggling proceeds the obstinacy of the apartheid regime may derail the process at any time. But it just may happen that circumstances conspire to give Washington a major foreign policy success that, while depressing for all those whose minds are concentrated exclusively on the goal of overthrowing apartheid, still ultimately represents a consolidation for the progressive forces of the region. ●
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