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Pitfalls in Aiding the Angolan Rebels

Covert aid to Jonas Savimbi's Unita, the durable insurgent movement in Angola, is likely to be approved by the Reagan administration. However, actual disbursement of the aid probably will be delayed until January, in hope that talks with the Marxist regime ruling Angola lead to an agreement on the withdrawal of about 35,000 Cuban troops stationed there. Such a delay is welcome, in that it will provide more time for Washington to ponder exactly what its goals are in Angola and how best to achieve them.

Mr. Savimbi is an astute and competent guerrilla leader. For almost 20 years he has kept Unita intact, fighting first against the Portuguese colonial forces and since 1975 against the Marxist government. Mr. Savimbi also has attracted a great deal of foreign support, and not only from South Africa, which provides direct support for his guerrillas, but from such diverse sources as China, Morocco and Zaire. Should the U.S. also get involved?

Africa

by Robert Jaster

The last CIA intervention in Angola's affairs, in 1975, was a disaster. With no clear objective, and with little understanding of Angolan politics or of the groups competing for power, the U.S. stumbled into the midst of a civil war for which it was woefully unprepared. Has anything been learned since then? Are the political and military realities understood? Is there now a clear and attainable objective?

If the goal is to see Mr. Savimbi installed in power in the capital of Luanda, a massive and long-term U.S. military commitment would be required, and even that would not be enough to ensure success. Angola is larger than the entire U.S. eastern seaboard from Maine to Florida and roughly four times the size of Vietnam. It has few roads or railways. Cut by deep river gorges, Angola's mountains are ideal guerrilla terrain. Unita could survive there indefinitely, even without external assistance. But an offensive to take the capital, about 700 miles from Mr. Savimbi's stronghold in Angola's southeast corner, is another matter. Mr. Savimbi himself no longer talks of taking Luanda. Indeed, recent government counterattacks almost reached his headquarters at Jamba. Only a series of heavy strikes by the South African Air Force turned back the offensive.

If the U.S. objective is to bring about the departure of the Cuban combat troops, who serve as the government's major defense against attacks by Unita, logistical aid to Mr. Savimbi would be counterproductive. Unita's impressive guerrilla capabilities have enabled it to deny the government control over the economically important central plateau, and to stage hit-and-run raids throughout most of Angola. The threat posed by Unita is made far more serious by South Africa's demonstrated willingness to intervene militarily on Mr. Savimbi's behalf. Since withdrawing last April from Angola's southern border area, South African forces have returned on several occasions, either to attack the Namibian guerrilla movement Swapo's staging areas in Angola or to assist Unita. As long as Angola feels threatened by Unita's guerrilla activities or by attack from South Africa, it will not agree to a Cuban withdrawal. The greater the threat posed by Unita, the greater will be the government's dependence on Cuban troops and Soviet-supplied weapons to remain in power.

The independence of the Angolan government is a subject of dispute, but it is likely the Angolans want to be rid of the Cuban combat brigade, whose maintenance costs absorb the bulk of the country's oil revenues. In earlier triangular talks with the U.S. and South Africa, the Angolans offered a phased Cuban withdrawal, subject to South African pledges to implement the long-stalled United Nations settlement plan for Namibia, and to firm safeguards against South African attacks. Thus Angola tacitly accepted the U.S.-proposed linkage of a Cuban withdrawal to a settlement of the Namibian problem.

Recent events, however, have hardened the Angolan and South African positions, and brought a suspension of serious talks. South Africa's internal troubles and its deteriorating relations with the U.S. virtually rule out any near-term South African concessions on Namibia. The Angolans, too, have taken a hard line, in part because they believe the current unrest in South Africa will weaken Pretoria's bargaining position. Congressional repeal of the Clark amendment, which banned U.S. aid to Angolan guerrillas, further cooled Angola's interest in resuming the talks.

Yet there is no real alternative to negotiations. It is highly unlikely that the Angolans can be forced to send the Cubans home, or the South Africans to leave Namibia. Nor can Unita or Swapo, both of which are legitimate national movements, ultimately be denied a political role in their respective countries. Only a broad regional settlement involving South Africa, Angola, Swapo and Unita will lead to a resolution of these issues. Since there are no regional institutions through which these parties might be brought together, outside mediation will be required. In South Africa and other African countries the U.S. is widely regarded as the only choice to take on this task. Therefore, when the opposing sides are ready to resume talks, as in time they must, the U.S. must be prepared to play a leading role. It cannot do this if it has become a party to the conflict.

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