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Angola masses troops for assault on UNITA

By James M. Dorsey
and James Morrison
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Soviet-backed Cuban and Angolan troops are preparing for a massive offensive against U.S.-supported rebels in southern Angola, administration officials and intelligence analysts said yesterday.

They reported that hundreds of military planes are shuttling military equipment and Cuban and Angolan troops to bases near the liberated zone held by guerrillas of Jonas Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).

"The Cubans are moving in large numbers from their bases in the north to the south," said one official.

"There are large-scale preparations for a dry-season offensive," said another, adding that the offensive is expected to begin at the end of this month or in early May, depending on when the rains end.

The officials and analysts said UNITA would be able to survive a slow and me-

thodical Soviet-backed drive into its territory by dispersing and regrouping later. If the rebels become too hard-pressed, South Africa is likely to come to their assistance — as it has before — which could lead to a direct confrontation with Cuban forces.

"There is a great potential for clashes between the Cubans and the South Africans," one analyst said.

Administration officials estimate there are 37,000 Cuban, 2,500 Soviet and 2,500 East German military personnel in Angola. UNITA claims to have 62,000 men under arms.

A UNITA spokesman in Washington said he was still awaiting confirmation of the buildup from rebel headquarters in Jamba, Angola. But the spokesman, Tito Chingunji, said the Cubans are most likely resupplying forces in Luso, in the central portion of Angola, which is also along the northern border of UNITA territory.

He said the other supply point is Menongue, a southern town near Cuito Cuanavale, along a slice of government-

controlled land that points like a finger into rebel land.

Luanda's troops occupy three other towns in UNITA territory: Cazombo in the northwest, Munhango in the east and Lucusse in the north central portion.

Government forces captured Cazombo in their last major offensive in late 1985. But UNITA, with massive military assistance from South Africa, routed Angolan and Cuban troops when they tried to capture Mavinga, a strategic town near Jamba.

Last year, UNITA foiled other government attempts to launch a dry-season offensive by attacking overextended supply lines, Mr. Chingunji said.

He said UNITA has prevented government troops from moving beyond the towns they occupy in rebel territory by "pre-emptive attacks."

"This has paid off up until now," he said. "They are beleaguered in Cazombo, Luccuse and Munhango."

UNITA officials recently have reiterated their calls for a negotiated solution to the conflict in a bid to avert the expected offensive. Earlier this month, UNITA said it was willing to reopen the Benguela railroad, a key trade route linking Angola's Atlantic coast with neighboring Zaire.

UNITA also has asked the Central Intelligence Agency for increased assistance to confront the onslaught. But the ability of the United States to step up materiel aid to the rebels may be subject to severe budgetary constraints, the officials said.

Last year, Congress voted to give UNITA \$15 million in covert military support.

Intelligence analysts said the military buildup in Angola may be an effort to distract attention from the guerrilla war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

"The Soviets have in the past coordinated their initiatives in various parts of the world such as Angola and Afghanistan," one analyst said. "It would be very convenient for the Soviets to distract attention," said another.