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South Africans dig in to win war in Namibia

~~First of two articles~~

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OSHAKATI, Namibia — The South African army intelligence officer had finished his briefing. Everything seemed neat and tidy, too tidy considering the brutality of the 19-year war here between South African forces and SWAPO, the black guerrilla group that is seeking independence for this country.

The officer stood straight, squashing between thumb and forefinger in an ashtray one of many cigarettes he had chain-smoked, and held his pointer like a club in his other hand. Any questions? Just one. What happens when South Africa leaves Namibia, which it has been occupying illegally since 1966?

The officer laughed. When he stopped laughing, he said, "Whoever said anything about leaving?"

For almost two decades, white South Africa has refused to end its illegal occupation of Namibia — known as South-West Africa to the South Africans. For almost as long, South African soldiers have led tribesmen and Bushmen into battle against the indigenous revolutionaries of SWAPO, the South-West Africa People's Organization.

How many thousands of civilians have been killed and maimed, tortured and displaced remains anyone's guess.

Namibia, the last colony of Africa still administered by a foreign power, is South Africa's buffer against what it sees as Soviet inroads in southern Africa. The front line where those concerns are played out is here, on the northern border area of the country.

On a recent seven-day, 700-mile trip along the border that Namibia shares with Angola and Zambia, it became clear that the South African Defense Force (SADF) is digging in, making improvements and tightening security at military and air installations.

More importantly, the South African army is going after the "hearts and minds" of the civilian population in a long-term counterinsurgency program it has code-named Operation Backbone. The idea, army officers made clear, is to take away popular support from SWAPO, which is recognized by the United Nations as the legitimate representative of Namibians.

So the South Africans are building roads, clinics and schools. They're also recruiting, training and arming small ethnic armies of tribesmen and Bushmen known as the South-West Africa Territorial Force (SWATF), an elite group among a people with a long history of poverty and illiteracy.

The territorial force members are paid astronomical salaries — about \$300 a month — compared with the money their fellow tribesmen earn as farmers. And, what's more, they get the same housing and clothing as white officers.

"We have won the war militarily and we can continue to win militarily. Now, we must win the war politically, and to do that we must win the people and show them we can protect them," said the intelligence officer at Oshakati, just a few miles from the northern border with Angola.

The South Africans may be winning the continuing border war, but they do not control the border region. At nightfall, they retreat into their camps and sprawling bases replete with suburban-style homes for officers, swimming pools and sports fields, leaving the countryside and towns to SWAPO guerrillas who cross the border from Angola, lay mines, blow up power and telephone lines and water towers, assassinate political enemies and spread their propaganda just as the South Africans do in the daytime.

By day, the army and territorial force patrol the towns and countryside by foot, on motorcycles and horses, in armored anti-mine vehicles and in heavy personnel carriers that are used to "Bundu bash," smash their way through heavy bush.

It is a classic guerrilla-war situation, with

the South Africans ruling the day and the guerrillas ruling the night through stealth, cunning and intimidation. The two rarely confront one another.

The army uses its forward military and air bases as launching pads for raids and strikes into Angola, where SWAPO has its main bases and training areas. Occasionally, as happened in September, the army will attack Angolan forces that have been fighting the pro-South African rebels of UNITA.

UNITA, the Portuguese acronym for the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, has been fighting the Soviet-backed Marxist government of Angola for 10 years. A key issue is the presence of an estimated 23,000 to 30,000 Cuban troops in Angola.

Both the South African government and the U.S. government have singled out that issue as the main reason for not holding elections in Namibia as called for by the U.N. Security Council in 1978.

The Angolan government has acknowledged that it needs the Cuban troops to fight UNITA, that without the Cubans the Angolan forces stand a good chance of losing the civil war.

Now, the U.S. Congress has repealed a law prohibiting military aid to the rebels. It is unlikely that in the face of U.S.-funded rebels, the Angolan government would give up the Cuban aid.

South African intelligence officers believe that Namibia, Angola and South Africa are pawns in the big power game between the Soviet Union and the United States. Supporting their theory is the disclosure last month that the CIA and the U.S. Defense Department are urging the Reagan administration to approve at least \$200 million in military aid to the rebels.

Without doubt, this pleases the South Africans, who believe the Soviets want to take over the entire southern Africa region and are using SWAPO as one of their tools.

"The Angolans and SWAPO are receiving more and more sophisticated weapons from the Soviets," said an army brigadier in the army intelligence headquarters in Pretoria, the South African administrative capital. "We don't see them as a threat to South Africa itself, but in strategic terms, it means the Soviets are being given bases in southern Africa. The Angolans are building up a dependence on the Soviets, and as far-fetched as it may seem, it is in preparation for an offensive role in the region."

The brigadier said the army did not expect much help from any outside powers in its war against SWAPO and what South Africa terms Soviet expansionism. He said that the army closely watches the situation in Angola and that nothing could stop it from protect-

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ing its interests.

"We hope SWAPO and the Angolans realize that we will cross the border and strike them hard whenever we think it is necessary," the brigadier said.

South Africa's involvement in Namibia goes back to 1920, when it was given a mandate by the League of Nations to govern the country, a former German colony. After World War II, the South Africans refused the United Nations' request to put the mineral-rich area — slightly smaller than the combined size of Texas and Oklahoma — under a trusteeship. In 1966, the United Nations revoked the mandate. The next year SWAPO began its guerrilla war to free Namibia of South African forces.

So far, the South Africans have rebuffed all international pressure to let Namibia become independent. In the spring, South African formed an interim government for the country. No nation has recognized it as legitimate.

The South Africans have applied their own concept of time and commitment to Namibia, which they believe is the key to winning a revolutionary war. For example, they believe the United States lost the Vietnam War because of the time pressures created by politics in the United States.

"Time is a neutral factor. In the West, time loses. But here in the African context, time is meaningless. We can use it as well as the revolutionary," said an army major as he stood watching a purple and red sunset over the Zambezi River in the Caprivi Strip at the northeastern tip of Namibia.

"We don't have a proper date for independence in South-West. Both we and SWAPO want to make the best use of time," the major said. "The strategists have said that time is on the side of the revolutionary. Now we are saying time is on our side. The key is who makes best use of time, and we are organizing against the enemy on all fronts, political, militarily and economically."

Army officers, all of whom are required to study Marxist revolutionary theory, speak in revolutionary terms, saying that Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Tse-tung was right when he said that power came from the barrel of the gun, but that the revolutionary is powerless if there is no one to carry the gun.

They also say that Mao was correct when he said the revolutionary must "swim with the fishes in the sea," but that this fails if the sea is taken away.

These two concepts lie at the heart of the SADF counterinsurgency program: winning the people's trust so that SWAPO has no base of support among the populace.

In the Caprivi Strip, where SWAPO began its war against South Africa in 1967, the army for the time being has won. It has pacified the population and says there has not been an incident of terrorism there in six years. The army has built roads, schools and clinics and has trained and armed a Caprivian army.

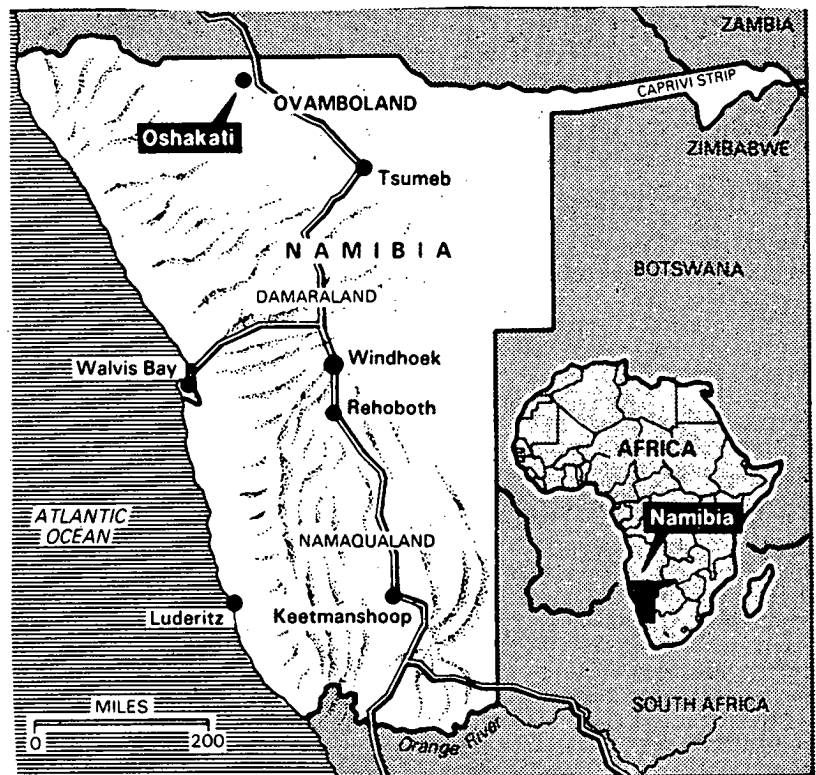
From the Mpacha air base in the Caprivi Strip, South African jets can reach the capitals of Zaire, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Zambia and fly over Angola. It gives them a reach into the heart of black Africa. Because of its strategic location, intelligence officers say South Africa will never give it up. They say SWAPO has already promised the Soviets use of the Caprivi when they drive the South Africans out.

The Caprivi area has fewer than 100,000 people — a relatively uninhabited region in a country of slightly more than a million people and 11 major ethnic or tribal groups, including the whites, who number 76,000.

In the other areas of the border, especially Ovamboland, home to 500,000 Ovambo, the war is hot and nasty. The army calls Ovamboland "the operations area."

Here a war of terror and atrocities goes on relentlessly, just as it has for 19 years. The army claims it has killed nearly 10,000 SWAPO guerrillas in that time; it says it has lost 568 South African soldiers.

As is the case in most wars, the civilians, caught in the middle by unrelenting military and political forces, suffer the most.



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