

Angolan sting

By Robert I. Rotberg

DELIVERING a covert big sting to Angola will escalate existing regional conflict and add unnecessarily to tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. But that is precisely what the Reagan administration mistakenly intends.

The Central Intelligence Agency, acting on instructions from the White House, plans to supply the rebels of Jonas Savimbi's antigovernment Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) with Stingers, the portable, heat-seeking anti-aircraft missiles. The United States also wants to give some to insurgents in Afghanistan and the anti-Sandinista cadres in Nicaragua/Honduras.

Leaders of both the Senate and the House Select Committees on Intelligence are attempting to rush bills through Congress denying covert assistance to UNITA if the Stinger transfers are not reversed.

Since 1978 UNITA has successfully prevented Angola's Soviet-backed government from exercising control over about 40 percent of its territory. UNITA has often struck close to Luanda, the nation's capital; UNITA power has closed the central rail line and made Angola's southern half unsafe for government forces.

The official government of Angola is supported financially and militarily by the Soviet Union. Soviet and East German officers advise the regular Angolan Army. But the government's main defense against UNITA is the presence of 35,000 well-armed Cuban troops.

UNITA would be a less formidable fighting force if it were not assisted financially, militarily, and logistically by South Africa. Indeed, it is easy to argue that UNITA has packed a robust punch only because of the steady transfer of supplies from South Africa and because of the direct assistance of a South African-officered battalion, and the provision of South African air cover, radar surveillance, and shared intelligence.

Aiding UNITA aids South Africa. That is one serious strike against the US administration's current effort to back UNITA. To do so aligns the US squarely with that apartheid regime at a time when the administration seeks to demonstrate its abhorrence of apartheid and its preference for a peaceful, democratic-majority solution to the turmoil in South Africa.

The US seeks regional peace. It has condemned South African attacks on Lesotho, Botswana, Mozambique, and Angola. But supplying Stingers would attempt to tip the regional balance toward South Africa, in accord with the hegemonic designs of South African foreign policy.

Equally serious, if not more so, is the impact that supplying Stingers can have on Soviet and Cuban interests in the southern African region. It enhances them at the very time the US is trying desperately to deprive the Soviets and the Cubans of legitimacy in Angolan and African eyes. Sending Stingers plays into the hands of the Soviets. It gives the USSR, as Angola's best friend, glittering credibility when Soviet influence was otherwise waning. The Angolan government would prefer the Cubans to leave, but now must urge them to stay.

The war for Angola has for many years been comparatively low level. The Stingers, useful against troop-carrying helicopters and other low-flying gunships, escalate the potential for war. Soviet and Cuban leaders are unlikely to refrain from matching the Stingers with sophisticated weaponry of their own. Thus the introduction of Stingers is bound to increase rather than reduce the war in southern Africa as well as the competition within the region and globally between the US and the Soviet Union.

The administration believes that covert aid to Mr. Savimbi will twist the tail of the Soviet bear so hard that it will relax its hold on Angola, Nicaragua, or Afghanistan. But the opposite result is at least equally likely. Assisting UNITA diminishes the credibility of the US in Africa as well as with Africans in South Africa, bolsters the Soviet Union, links Washington squarely with Pretoria, and compounds the folly of "constructive engagement" by adding a policy of covert aid to Angola which is illogical and counterproductive.

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