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Angola incursion hot debate topic in South Africa

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JOHANNESBURG, South Africa — South Africa's admitted military involvement in Angola will be a major issue in parliament this week.

During the defense vote debate Gen. Magnus Malan, the Minister of Defense, will be called on to explain the presence of South African soldiers in northern Angola. A reconnaissance team of unannounced size had clashed with Angolan forces, South Africa has acknowledged, adding that two of the men had been killed and one captured.

The prisoner was identified as Wynand Johannes du Toit, and those killed as Louis Pieter van Breda and Rowland Liebenberg. They were thought to have been members of South Africa's crack reconnaissance commando. Pretoria has stated they had been on an intelligence mission gathering information on the outlawed African National Congress, the South West Africa Peoples' Organization and other foreign forces in Angola.

Angola, however, has insisted the men had been on a sabotage mission aimed at oil production facilities in the country's northern Cabinda province where a subsidiary of Gulf Oil operates installations. The oil operations, guarded by Cuban forces, are a major foreign currency source for the country and help pay for the sizeable Cuban military presence in the country.

Angola has defended the estimated 30,000-strong Cuban presence as vital to counter South African aggression.

The South African press over the weekend carried pictures of the men, with Mr. du Toit shown bandaged in a hospital in Angola's capital of Luanda and Mr. Van Breda and Mr. Liebenberg in coffins.

South Africa's Foreign Minister, R.F. Botha, in a memorandum to the Luanda government on Friday, asked for an urgent meeting to discuss the return of the men, a request with which Luanda did not appear ready to comply immediately.

The message also said that South African forces were in northern Angola because the region now was "the main base area" for the training of ANC guerrillas. The ANC, the most prominent of exiled organizations, has been illegal in South Africa for more than two decades.

The incident already has brought strong condemnation both inside and outside South Africa, including sharp attacks on Pretoria's credibility. The pro-government Citizen newspaper called the operation the "height of folly."

With the United States demanding an explanation of the operation, Ambassador Herman Nickel received a full briefing by South African officials over the weekend.

The secret military operation undoubtedly will have serious international diplomatic repercussions for Pretoria, which only last month had conducted a well-publicized withdrawal of what it said were its remaining troops in Angola.

"The government must clearly make up its mind," opposition political leader Frederick Van Zyl Slabbert said, "are we to be a force for peace and regional co-operation or be seen as a force for de stabilization?"

"The covert operation also could put a damper on Washington's policy of "constructive engagement" and bring renewed criticism of two men associated with that policy, Ambassador Nickel and Chester Crocker, undersecretary of state for African affairs.

In addition, negotiations on independence for neighboring Namibia

will be affected as both Washington and Pretoria have made a Cuban withdrawal from Angola a precondition to Namibia's independence.

While the incident has caused an international uproar, South Africa previously has had to negotiate the release of prisoners from Angola.

During their foray into Angola in 1975-1976, a number of South African soldiers were captured. It was two years before the eight South Africans were exchanged for Cuban prisoners.

South Africa for many years was heavily involved in Angola and pushed deep into the country during the 1975-1976 civil war, eventually pulling out under strong Western pressure.

Commandos also have struck at other ANC targets in neighboring black countries. On Jan. 30, 1981 commandos attacked three houses in the suburbs of the Mozambican capital of Maputo.

According to the Mozambican version, about 20 commandos carried out the attack, killing about a dozen ANC members and one civilian. South African casualties were put at two killed.

ANC offices in Maputo were attacked on two other occasions. On May 23, 1983 South African jets struck in retaliation for a bomb attack in Pretoria that killed 18 three days earlier. Another commando raid was conducted later in 1983.

In November 1982, commandos also attacked ANC personnel in the Lesotho capital of Maseru. Some dozen houses and apartments were attacked in the four-hour raid, killing about 30.