

CUBANS

in ANGOLA

The following account of Cuban military activities in Angola has been excerpted from a lengthy article by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and distributed by Prensa Latina the Cuban news agency. Originally published in the US radical newspaper The Guardian early this year, it is based on extensive interviews in Cuba with officials and soldiers who went to Angola.

The author, a progressive writer born in Colombia in 1928, is considered one of Latin America's foremost living writers. He is most widely known in the US for his novel One Hundred Years of Solitude.

In 1843, a female slave called Black Carlota had taken machete in hand to lead a slave uprising at the Triunvirato sugar mill, in the Matanzas region, and had been killed in the rebellion. In homage to her, the action of solidarity to Angola was named Operation Carlota.

It began with the sending of a reinforced battalion of special forces, made up of 650 men. They were flown over a span of 13 days from the military section of Jose Marti Airport in Havana to the airport at Luanda, still occupied by Portuguese troops.

Their mission was to hold back the (South Africa-UNITA-FNLA) offensive so the Angolan capital would not fall into enemy hands before the Portuguese left, and then to keep up the resistance until reinforcements could arrive by sea.

But the men on the first two flights were sure they were already too late, and the only hope they nourished was that they might be able to save (the province of) Cabinda.

The first contingent left at 4 pm, November 7, on a special flight of Cubana de Aviacion, on one of the legendary Bristol Britannia BB-218 turboprops that the English manufacturers had stopped making and the rest of the world had stopped using

The passengers, who remember clearly that they numbered 82 because that was the same as the number of men on the Granma, the boat that carried Fidel Castro and his band to Cuba to launch a revolution, had the healthy look of tourists tanned by the Caribbean sun. They all wore summer clothes, with no military insignia, and carried briefcases and regular passports with their real names and identification.

The members of the special battalion which is not under the revolutionary armed forces but rather the ministry of the interior, are well-trained warriors, with a high level of political and ideological formation. Some hold college degrees, are voracious readers and occupy themselves with intellectual pursuits



Cuban soldiers fighting for Angolan liberation

But in their briefcases they carried machine pistols, and in the cargo hold of the plane, instead of baggage, there was a substantial load of light artillery, small guns, three 75 mm cannons and three 82 mm mortars

(Just as the first two planes arrived in Angola), three ships were leaving Cuba bringing an artillery regiment, a mechanised battalion and recoilless rifles; they would land in Angola on November 27.

On the other hand, the columns of Holden Roberto (head of the FNLA) were so close that only hours before they had shot and killed an old native woman who was trying to reach the headquarters at Gran Farni, where the Cuban forces were concentrated.

So the men arriving on the two planes had no time to rest: they put on their olive-green uniforms, joined the ranks of the MPLA and went into battle.

During nine months, the mobilisation of

human and material resources was a drama of daring. The decrepit Britannias, patched up with brakes from Soviet-made Ilyushin 18s, kept up a steady and almost unreal traffic

Cuba's chief of staff went to Angola personally at the end of November - anything was possible then, except losing the war.

But the historical fact is that the war was at the point of being lost. In the first week of December the situation was so hopeless that some thought was given to the possibility of fortifying Cabinda and saving a beachhead near Luanda for an evacuation.

FIDEL'S INVOLVEMENT

Fidel Castro himself was keeping up to date on the smallest details of the war. He was at the sendoff for each troop ship and before it sailed he would call together the combat units in the theatre at the Cabana. He sought out the commanders of the special

forces battalion that went on the first flight and drove them to the steps of the plane in a Soviet-made jeep. It is probable that then and in every one of the other farewells, Castro had to hide an envy for those going off to a war he could not be in.

By then, there was not a spot on the map of Angola that he could not identify, not a quirk of the land that he did not know by heart. So intensely and meticulously did he follow the war that he could cite any statistic of Angola as if he were talking about Cuba. He spoke of Angola's cities, its customs and its people as if he had lived there all his life.

At the start of the war, when the situation was especially pressing, he stayed in the general staff command room as long as 14 hours at a stretch without eating or sleeping, as if he were on the campaign.

He followed the progress of battles, using colored indicators on wall-sized tactical maps, and was in constant contact with the battlefield high command (of the MPLA)

The difficulties of December were due in the first place to the tremendous firepower of the enemy which, by this time, had received more than \$50 million in military aid from the US. In the second place, they were due to Angola's delay in asking for help and the time it took to get the help to Angola.

Finally, they were due to the miserable conditions and cultural backwardness left by half a millenium of soulless colonialism. That, even more than the first two factors, posed the greatest obstacle to a decisive integration between the Cuban troops and the armed people of Angola

The Portuguese colonialists had built beautiful, modern cities to live in, with air-conditioned glass buildings and stores with huge electric signs. But these were cities for whites, like those the gringos built around Old Havana

Beneath the mask of civilisation lay a vast and rich land of misery: The natives' standard of living was one of the lowest in the world

Old superstitions not only complicated daily life, but also hindered the war effort. The Angolans had been convinced that bullets would not penetrate white skin, they feared the magic of airplanes and they refused to go into the trenches because tombs were only for the dead.....

Angola was a dirty war in which one had to watch out as much for snakes as for mercenaries, as much for cannibals as for cannonballs. A Cuban commander, in the midst of a battle, fell into an elephant trap.

At first, the black Africans, conditioned by generations of resentment against the Portuguese were hostile to the white Cubans. Many times, especially in Cabinda, Cuban scouts felt betrayed by the primitive telegraph of the talking drums, whose thump-thump could be heard for as much as 20 miles.

South Africa's white troops which fired on ambulances with 140 mm. cannons, threw up smokescreens on the battlefield to collect their white dead, but left the black bodies for the vultures

In Cuba, all the news coming from Angola was bad.

On December 11, in Hengo a Cuban armored car with four officers in it set out along a path where some mines had been found.

Although four other cars had already passed through safely, the scouts advised against the route which cut only a few unnecessary minutes off the trip. Ignoring the advice, the car was almost instantly blown up. Two special forces battalion commanders were gravely wounded, and Commandant Raul Diaz Arguello commander of international operations in Angola, a hero of the struggle against Batista and a man widely loved in Cuba died instantly.

That was the bitterest news for the Cubans, but it was not to be the last. The next day came the disaster at Catofe, perhaps the worst setback of the entire war

A South African column had managed to repair a bridge under the cover of the morning mists and had surprised the Cubans who were in the midst of a withdrawal. The analysis of this defeat showed that it was due to an error on the Cubans' part

On December 22, at the closing of the party congress, Cuba gave its first official indication that it had troops in Angola.

The war was still not going well. Fidel Castro, in the closing speech, reported that

the invaders in Cabinda had been defeated in 72 hours; that on the northern front the troops of Roberto who had been only 15 miles from Luanda on November 10 had been forced to retreat to more than 60 miles away; and that South Africa's armored columns which had advanced more than 400 miles had been blocked more than 120 miles from Luanda. The detailed report was comforting, but it was far from a victory

Cuban aid reached such a level that at one point there were 15 Cuban ships on the high seas bound for Luanda. The unstoppable offensive of the MPLA on all fronts turned the tide, once and for always, in its favor In January, it was conducting operations originally planned for April

THE TIDE TURNS

After mid-March the South African troops began their retreat.

On April 1, at 9.15 a.m., the advance of the MPLA troops under the command of Cuban commandant Leopoldo Cintras Frias arrived at the dam at Raucana, next to the chicken-

wire fence marking the frontier with Namibia. An hour and a quarter later the South African governor of Namibia accompanied by two of his officers, asked permission to cross the border to begin talks with the MPLA.

Commandant Cintras Frias received them in a wooden shed in the 10-yard wide neutral strip between the two countries, and the two groups gathered around a large dining table

Agreement took only two hours to reach, but the meeting lasted longer, for the South African general ordered a succulent dinner, prepared on the Namibian side. As they dined, he offered several toasts in beer

Afterwards, the program of the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola was agreed to by Castro and (Agostinho) Neto during their meeting on March 14 in Conakry, after victory was achieved. They decided that the withdrawal would be gradual but that as many Cubans as needed would remain in Angola as long as needed to build a modern and strong army, able to guarantee the future internal security and



The convoy carrying Sth. African armed forces out of Angola rolls across the Cunene River at Ruacana Falls, 300 metres from the border, bound for the Ruacana military base in S.W. Africa.

independence of the country without outside help

For security reasons, the Cuban press had not published any mention of the participation in Angola. But, as usually happens in Cuba, even with military subjects as delicate as this, the operation was a secret carefully kept by 8 million persons. The first congress of the Cuban Communist Party which was to be held late in December and which was a sort of national obsession all year, took on a new dimension.

The volunteer units had been formed by sending private messages to members of the first reserve made up of all males between 17 and 25 and those who had been members of the revolutionary armed forces. They were summoned by telegram to report to the appropriate military committees, with no word of why they were called. The reason was so obvious that everyone who believed that he had military skills hastened to his military committee without waiting for a telegram. It took a great deal of effort to keep this mass concern from turning into a national disorder.

Insofar as the emergency permitted, selection criteria were quite stringent. Not only were military qualifications and physical and moral condition taken into account, but also work background and political education.

Nevertheless, there were innumerable cases of volunteers trying to sneak through the filtering process. A qualified engineer tried to pass himself off as a truckdriver, a high official pretended to be a mechanic, a woman almost got away with passing herself off as a recent army recruit.

A youth who joined without his father's permission met his father in Angola, because his father had also gone without telling his family.

CUBA'S AFRICA POLICY

Cuba's act of solidarity with Angola was far from a casual or impulsive act but rather the end result of a continuous policy towards Africa by the Cuban revolution.

There was only one new or dramatic element in this delicate decision: this time it was not only a question of sending what aid it could, but of taking on a large conventional war some 6000 miles from its own territory,

with the cost in blood and treasure incalculable and the political consequences unforeseeable

It was a decision of irreversible consequences, too large and complex to be resolved in 24 hours. Nonetheless, the leadership of the Communist Party of Cuba had only 24 hours to decide, and it decided without flinching, in a large, calm meeting on November 5. Far from what has so often been said, it was an independent and sovereign act of Cuba. Only after the decision was made, not before, was the Soviet Union informed.

Contacts between the Cuban revolution and the MPLA had been very intense since they first began in August of 1965 when Che Guevara fought alongside the guerrillas in the Congo. The following year Neto himself went to Cuba accompanied by Endo the military commander of the MPLA, who was later killed

In May 1975, as the Portuguese were getting ready to pull out of their African colonies, Cuban Commandant Flavio Bravo met Neto in Brazzaville, and Neto requested help with the shipment of arms and asked about the possibility of further, more specific aid. As a result, Commandant Raul Diaz Arguelles led a civilian Cuban delegation to Luanda three months later. Neto was more precise He asked Cuba to send instructors to open and run four military training camps.

CUBAN SHIPS ARRIVE

Although the MPLA which began in 1956 was Angola's oldest liberation movement and the only one with a broad popular base, and although it offered a social, political and economic program that suited the country's conditions, it was nonetheless the one in the weakest military position. It had Soviet arms, but lacked people trained to use them

....

So when the (Cuban troopship) *Viet Nam Heroico* arrived in Puerto Amboim at 6.30 a.m. on October 4, and the *Coral Island* arrived on the 7th and the *La Plata* at Punta Negra on the 11th, they docked without anyone's permission - but also without anyone's opposition.

The Cuban instructors were met by the MPLA and immediately set up the four training centres: one in Delatando which the

Portuguese had called Salazar, 180 miles east of Luanda; the second in Benguela, the Atlantic seaport; the third in Saurimo, formerly Enrique de Carvalho, in the remote deserted eastern province of Lunda, where the Portuguese had had a military base that they destroyed before abandoning; and the fourth in the enclave of Cabinda.

ROBERTO'S TROOPS ADVANCE

Roberto's troops of the opposing FNLA were then so close to the Angolan capital that a Cuban artillery instructor giving his students their first lessons at Delatando saw the armored cars of the mechanised brigade of regular South African troops cross from Namibia, and three days later they had occupied the towns of Sa da Bandeira and Mocamedes without meeting any resistance.

It was a Sunday stroll. The South Africans had tape cassettes of lively music in their tanks. In the north, the leader of a mercenary column directed operations from a Honda sports car, beside a blonde who looked like a movie actress. They advanced as if they were on holiday, with no scouts out ahead, and they probably knew where the rocket came from that blew the car into bits. In the woman's overnight case there was only a party dress, a bikini and an invitation to the victory party Roberto was already planning in Luanda

By the end of the week, the South Africans had penetrated more than 350 miles into Angolan territory and were advancing towards Luanda at the rate of more than 40 miles a day. On November 3, they attacked the lightly-manned training camp for recruits in Benguela. The Cuban instructors there had to break off their classes to lead their apprentice soldiers against the invaders, teaching them during lulls in battle

The MPLA leaders, prepared for guerrilla war but not for large-scale conventional battles, then understood that their combined neighbors, equipped with the most rapacious and devastating resources of imperialism could not be beaten without an urgent appeal to international solidarity

CHE'S AFRICA HISTORY

Nothing demonstrates more clearly the length and depth of the Cuban presence in Africa than the fact that Che Guevara

himself threw himself into the battles of the Congo at the peak of his career.

On April 25, 1965, he gave Fidel Castro a farewell letter resigning his rank as a commandant and everything else that tied him to the government of Cuba. On that same day, travelling alone, he took a commercial flight, using a false passport and a false name but not altering his appearance carrying with him an attache case filled with literary works and inhalers for his incessant asthma, and killing his empty hours in hotel rooms with interminable solo games of chess.

Three months later, in the Congo, he joined 200 Cuban troops who had travelled from Havana in an arms ship. Che's mission was to train guerrillas for the National Revolutionary Council of the Congo, then battling Moise Tshombe, the puppet of the old Belgian colonists and the international mining companies

For greater security (Che) was not listed as the head of the mission, so he was known by the nom-de-guerre of Tatu, Swahili for the number two.

Che stayed in the Congo from April to December 1965, not only training guerrillas but also directing them in battle and fighting alongside them.

His personal ties with Fidel about which there has been so much speculation, did not deteriorate at any time. The two kept up regular and cordial contacts through very efficient systems of communication.

When Moise Tshombe was defeated, the Congolese asked the Cubans to withdraw to make the armistice easier. Che left as he had come, without fanfare.

He took a commercial flight from Dar es Salaam, capital of Tanzania, burying his face in a book of chess problems during the entire six hours of flight. In the next seat his Cuban adjutant was kept busy, entertaining the political commissar of the army of Zanzibar who was an old admirer of Che and spoke tirelessly of him throughout the flight, asking for the latest news of him and saying over and over again how much he would like to see him again.

That fleeting, anonymous passage of Che Guevara through Africa planted a seed that no one could uproot.