

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY
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INFORMED QUESTIONS ON ANGOLAN POLITICAL-MILITARY ISSUES

Mr. TERRY R. DAVIDSON, DOS
COURSE 5604
THE GLOBAL SECURITY ARENA
SEMINAR G

PROFESSOR
THEODORE LAVEN

ADVISOR
CHARLES STEVENSON

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INFORMED QUESTIONS ON ANGOLAN POLITICAL-MILITARY ISSUES

Angola – rich in oil, diamonds and conflict – is embarking on a new era. For the first time since winning its independence from Portugal in 1975, this nation of 13 million has experienced a year of peace and is looking to a future beyond warfare. With proven oil reserves of 5.4 billion barrels and daily production close to 1 million barrels, what has to date been a strife-torn problem could become a major supplier of oil to the United States and an important player in sub-Saharan Africa.

For much of its independent history, Angola has been a battleground for the Cold War.¹ For centuries before independence, Portugal ruled Angola with the worst excesses of colonial Europeans, taking much, leaving little and sewing the seeds for internecine bloodshed. Though the U.S. interest in Angola revolves around oil – some 4 percent of U.S. oil imports come from Angola, and the figure could go much higher quickly² – a stable Luanda could also play a constructive role in a region known for instability. There are more questions than answers about Angola's military and political future; here are a few.

PARTIES, ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRACY

Though most political debate in Angola has been punctuated with bullets, the young nation does have some experience with democracy. The 1991 Bicesse Peace Accord between the MPLA (the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) and UNITA (the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) called for a ceasefire and national elections. Indeed, elections were held September 29-30 of 1992, and some

90 percent of the registered voters turned out to cast ballots in what international observers deemed a free and fair process. Jose Eduardo do Santos, who had served as the head of state under the Marxist-Leninist one-party government, defeated UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi. Rather than accept the election result, Savimbi took his troops back into war. Analysts have speculated that while Angola, supported by the international community, was able to pull off the technical feat of an election, the transition between conflict and democracy was too fast, an attempt to leap into democracy by a people who had no previous experience.³

Since the 1992 election, President Santos has been able to tell the world that he is a democratic president, though the country has had no more elections and groups such as Freedom House rank Angola in the “not free” category. With UNITA’s shift from war to politics, there is renewed talk of an election in 2004 or 2005, as well as work on a new constitution.

Questions:

- After the 1992 experience, what makes Angolans believe UNITA will accept the results of any future election?
- Can Angola hold an election prior to resettling the millions of IDPs (internally displaced persons)? If so, would the IDP camps constitute voting districts?
- Angola has seen a number of press freedom controversies over the past decade, with international groups criticizing the government for not allowing freedom of speech. Is the Angolan government dedicated to free speech? Will the new constitution put such guarantees in law?

- Do the main political parties see income distribution issues as a priority? How best can the political system create opportunity for the millions of Angolans who face severe poverty?

ANGOLA'S MILITARY CAPABILITIES

As Angola has been at war since Day One of its independence in 1975, it is no surprise that it has a formidable military, with total strength estimated at between 117,500⁴ and 150,000⁵. The Army dominates the force, with some 100,000 armed soldiers in 30 regiments. The 6,500-man Air Force is one of the best in sub-Saharan, including MiG-21s and MiG-23s supplied by the Soviet Union prior to the 1994 Lusaka Accord. The Air Force also has reportedly upgraded its fighter fleet with Sukhoi SU-27 and Sukhoi SU-24 aircraft.

While the force has been oriented toward battling the UNITA rebels for most of the past quarter century, Angolan troops have also intervened in the Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo in support of allied factions. For most of its existence, the Angolan Armed Forces (known as the FAA for the Portuguese acronym) has trained with Soviet and Cuban advisers. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of Cuban forces in the early 1990s, Angola contracted private military companies for training, including South Africa's Executive Outcomes and Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI), as well as Portuguese firms. Official government figures put defense spending at \$540 million in 1999, nearly 10 percent of Angola's GDP, though Jane's suggests that a figure of \$1.6 billion is more realistic.

Questions:

- With the war over, what kind of military force does Angola need for the future?
What do Angolans see as the principal security threats?
- As a new member of the United Nations Security Council, does Angola foresee participation in international peacekeeping missions in the future? How about participation in regional missions in Africa?
- As relations strengthen with South Africa, what kind of joint training is envisioned?
- What is the role of the Angolan military in the Congo and the DRC?

DEMOBILIZATION AND RESETTLEMENT

Angola's long civil war ended quickly following the death of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi in February 2002. By mid-March, the Angolan Armed Forces implemented a nationwide ceasefire and regional commanders entered into negotiations with UNITA counterparts. On April 4, 2002, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed in Luanda, formally bringing the conflict to a close. The MOU established 32 UNITA quartering areas (subsequently increased to 34) to house up to 55,000 UNITA combatants and 300,000 family members. In addition to assisting the rebel forces in the transition to civil life and providing basic humanitarian aid, the MOU provided for the recruitment of 5,000 former rebels into the Armed Forces.

Some press reports have indicated that government support to the camps has been lacking⁶, but even UNITA leader Lukamba Paulo Gato recognizes the huge task the government faces in resettling the combatants, their families and perhaps upwards of 4

million internally displaced people.⁷ Most international groups working in Angola are focused on resettlement and humanitarian issues, as literally dozens of NGOs have joined the United Nations and the Angolan government in trying to feed, house and train perhaps a third of the country's population.

Questions:

- What is the timeline for the reintegration of displaced populations into society?
What are the major impediments to moving quickly?
- Is a successful demobilization program an essential cornerstone for lasting peace in Angola?
- Are you confident that UNITA is completely disarmed?
- How have the former UNITA soldiers blended into the FAA? Have the former combatants made their own peace within military units?
- While dozens of groups from around the world are working with Angolans in the resettlement process and in providing humanitarian aid, the crisis has not received the international attention that others have. Why?
- How much of the resettlement problem is directly related to damaged infrastructure that makes it hard for people to return home? How much to land mines?

DEMINING

Angola's civil war employed land mines on a massive scale. The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), in its 2002 report, said Angola is one of the countries most affected by mines and unexploded ordnance.⁸ Press estimates range from

7 million to 15 million landmines; the ICBL states that 2,232 minefields are registered by the Angolan government. Some 660 locations have been cleared since 1995, 73 in 2001. The landmines are especially hazardous around cities, along roadways and close to the camps that host millions of displaced Angolans. An estimated 90,000 Angolans have died or been injured by mines, and the numbers continue to climb as displaced Angolans traverse unfamiliar areas on their way to IDP camps or back to their home provinces.⁹

Apart from humanitarian relief, demining efforts, landmine education and rehabilitation assistance for mine victims are among the most common NGO projects in Angola. Angola last July ratified the Ottawa Convention on Anti-Personnel Mines, a move that “signals to the international community the firm commitment of the Angolan Government to fight for the elimination of anti-personnel mines and other explosive devices.”¹⁰

Questions:

- What is the Angolan Government doing to rid the countryside of landmines?
- Can Angolans really go back to farming and normal activities before the landmines are removed?
- What importance does the Angolan Government place on the Ottawa Convention?
- Do you see a role for the U.S. military to assist in demining?

REGIONAL INTERESTS

Angola’s civil war spilled out into neighboring states, as Zambia and the two Congos were seen as supply bases for the UNITA rebels. Namibia, too, became involved,

as it allowed the Angolan Government to use its territory to mount attacks against UNITA bases. But, along with a return to peace in Angola, the neighborhood seems to be more peaceful. As the newly elected chair of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Luanda has taken more interest in this regional group.

There are remaining regional tensions. Closest to home, the Angolans have maintained troops in the Congo and DRC, partly to counter forces that support guerrillas in the tiny, oil-rich northern Angola province of Cabinda.¹¹ As for Southern Africa's most critical problem, Zimbabwe, Angola has pushed for moderation, both on the part of long-time ally Robert Mugabe and on the part of international critics.¹²

Questions:

- Following more than a decade of undeclared war with South Africa, the end of the apartheid regime led to the reestablishment of bilateral relations between Luanda and Pretoria in 1994. What is the nature of Angolan-South African relations today? What concrete projects are aimed at continuing improvement in those relations?
- What future does Angola see for the Congo and the DRC? What role is the Angolan military playing in the search for stability in these troubled countries? Are there forces in the Congo that pose a threat to Cabinda?
- What is Angola doing to help stabilize the situation in Zimbabwe?

U.S.-ANGOLAN POLITICAL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Since independence, U.S.-Angolan relations have mostly been seen through the filter of the Cold War.¹³ Before the MPLA could even establish a government in Luanda,

the United States joined South Africa and Zaire in backing UNITA, fueling a Cold War proxy war, as the Soviet Union and Cuba backed the MPLA. The move by then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to support a South African invasion of Angola in the fall of 1975 set the United States on the path of opposition to the government that was recognized by 41 of the 46 OAU members and most of the world.

The U.S. backing of UNITA ended with the end of the Cold War, and diplomatic overtures to the government were formalized with the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1993. Since then, the two nations have drawn closer as U.S. investment in oil exploration grows and the USAID mission in support of humanitarian assistance has reached \$90 million.¹⁴

Questions:

- Does past U.S. support for Jonas Savimbi and UNITA still color U.S.-Angolan relations? Do Angolans hold the United States and South Africa partially responsible for their devastating civil war?
- Can African oil-exporting nations join together to increase their influence in the United States? Are any such efforts underway?
- Has Angola's ability to dialogue with the United States improve with its placement on the U.N. Security Council?
- Beyond oil, what other sectors look promising for U.S. investment in Angola and two-way trade?

Endnotes

¹ Prexy Nesbitt, "U.S. Foreign Policy: Lessons from the Angola Conflict," in Africa Today Winter-Spring 1992.

² Luddy Hayden, Chevron-Texaco International Relations, Washington, D.C., author interview February 13, 2003.

³ Marina Ottaway, "Angola's Failed Elections," in Krishna Kumar (ed). Post Conflict Elections and International Assistance.

⁴ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment for Southern Africa, posted on-line July 9, 2002.

⁵ Bryan Hunt, State Department Angola Desk Officer, in briefing February 10, 2003.

⁶ Reese Erlich's National Public Radio report on the Angolan transit camp in Kuito aired on "Morning Edition" February 24, 2003.

⁷ Lukamba Paulo Gato, chairman of the UNITA party, in testimony before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Africa, June 13, 2002, available on-line at www.angola.org/referenc/speeches/gato061302.html.

⁸ Landmine Monitor Report 2002, International Campaign to Ban Landmines, available on-line at www.icbl.org/lm/2002/angola.html.

⁹ Andrea E. Ostheimer, "Aid Agencies: Providers of Essential Resources?" in Jakkie Cilliers and Christian Dietrich, (eds.). Angola's War Economy.

¹⁰ Angolan Government Press Release "Angola Ratifies the Ottawa Convention on Anti-Personnel Mines," <http://www.angola.org/referenc/pressrel/prst070902E.html>.

¹¹ Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment for Southern Africa, posted on-line August 12, 2002.

¹² Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment for Southern Africa, posted on-line August 12, 2002.

¹³ Karl Maier, Angola: Promises and Lies, published by Serif Press, 1996.

¹⁴ State Department Bureau of African Affairs "Background Note: Angola," available on-line at www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/6619.htm.

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