

Cuba in Africa: Seed Che

This is the last of three extracts from an article by the noted Latin American writer and prominent Communist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, giving the first Cuban-authorized account of the Angolan civil war:

Cuba's act of solidarity with Angola was far from a casual or impulsive act, but rather the end result of a continuous policy toward 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 taking on a large conventional war some 6,000 miles from its own territory, with the cost in blood and treasure incalculable and the political consequences unforeseeable.

The possibility that the United States might intervene openly, rather than through the mercenaries and South Africa as it had been doing for some time, was obviously one of the most disturbing unknowns. But a rapid analysis suggested that at least Washington would think twice about doing so:

It had just freed itself from the morass of Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. It had a President no one had elected. The CIA was under fire in Congress and low-rated by public opinion. The United States needed to avoid seeming—not only in the eyes of African countries, but especially in the eyes of American blacks—to ally itself with racist South Africa. Beyond all this it was in the midst of an election campaign in its Bicentennial year.

Furthermore, Cuba was sure it could count on solidarity and material aid from the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries, although it was also aware of the implications its action might hold for the policy of peaceful coexistence and international detente.

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 Nov. 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 revolu-



The Washington Post

Where Angolan guerrillas were trained.

Planted

tion and the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (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 [MPLA leader] Agostinho Neto himself went to Cuba, accompanied by Endo, the military commander of the MPLA, who was later killed in the then . . .

In May 1975, as the Portuguese were getting ready to pull out of their African colonies, Cuban Commandant

rimo, 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 it; and the fourth in the enclave of Cabinda.

Holden Roberto's troops of the opposing National Front (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 mechanized brigade of regular South African troops crossed 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 Holden 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 toward Luanda at the rate of more than 40 miles a day. On Nov. 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.

By then there as not a single African liberation movement that had not counted on the solidarity of Cuba, sometimes in the form of arms and war materiel and other times in the form of training for military and civilian technicians and specialists. Mozambique since 1963, Guinea-Bissau since 1963, Cameroon and Sierra Leone all sought and received some expression of solidarity and aid from the Cubans at one time or another. Guinean President Sekou Toure threw back a mercenary landing with the aid of a Cuban unit... When Neto called on Angolan students in Portugal to go and study in socialist countries, Cuba welcomed many of them. All of them are now involved in the construction of socialism in Angola, some in very prominent positions (including the finance minister, head of the military academy, etc.).

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, traveling 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 traveled 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 2.

Che Guevara 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 Castro, 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 Guevara 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 adjutan 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 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.

Flavio Bravo met Agostinho Neto in Brazzaville, and Neto requested help with 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.

Although the MPLA, which began in 1966, was Anngola'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.

There was no assurance that the Portuguese military would let the Cuban instructors disembark. Only on July 16, 1975, when Cuba had received the first aid request from the MPLA, did Castro ask Portugal's Col. Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho (then a leftist member of the junta in Lisbon) to arrange Portuguese permission for Cuban aid to Angola. During that visit to Havana, Carvalho promised to see to it, but his answer had not yet arrived.

So when the (Cuban troopship) Viet Nam Heroico arrived in Puerto Amboim at 6:30 a.m. Oct. 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 centers: one in Delatando, which the Portuguese had called Salazar, 180 miles east of Luanda; the second in Benguela, the Atlantic seaport; the third in Sau-