

Roberto Denies His Group In Angola Is Near Collapse

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KINSHASA, Zaire, Jan. 16 — Holden Roberto, president of the National Front for the Liberation of Angola, angrily denied tonight an American assessment that his movement was approaching the point of collapse.

There is no question of collapse, Mr. Roberto said as he got behind the wheel of his car at his headquarters compound here. "In any war there are highs and lows. Our struggle continues."

The American assessment of the prospects of the National Front, to which the United States has given some aid, was communicated earlier this week by the State Department to the Council of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The American view is widely shared in official and diplomatic circles in Zaire, which has been the National Front's principal supporter throughout its fight against Portugal and now in its war against the Soviet-supported Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola.

A Rapid Retreat

Diplomats said that the rapid retreat northward of National Front troops, pursued by Popular Front Forces spearheaded by a Cuban contingent, is viewed with grave concern by the Government of Zaire.

If the Soviet-supported forces reach the Angola-Zaire border from the Congo River, they would be in a position to cut Zaire's access to the only river route linking this almost landlocked country to the sea.

The Popular Front has already severed Zaire's principal rail link with the sea by cutting the Angolan railroad that connects Zaire with the Atlantic ports of Benguela and Lobo.

In the consensus of diplomats here, the National Front troops are in no condition to halt the Popular Movement's advance. It is assumed that Mr. Roberto's forces have been routed and that only a political decision not to put extreme pressure on Zaire would stop the Popular Movement's troops short of the Congo River.

6,000 Cubans Involved

Because it is generally believed here that most of the fighting on behalf of the Popular Movement is being done by the Cuban contingent, estimated at 6,000 to 7,000 men, relying entirely on Soviet weapons and supplies, the assumption is that such a decision would be made essentially in Moscow.

Diplomatic accounts supported by comments at National Front headquarters suggest that there is no real fighting. The National Front forces are said to be retreating in terror of the Soviet rockets that fire multiple salvos from their mobile launchers mounted on trucks.

Accounts received by diplomats here report that much of the civilian population is fleeing with the National Front troops, presumably out of fear of being caught in the war more than from partisan conviction. The Portuguese Consulate General is crowded with haggard and bedraggled Portuguese peasants from northern Angola, who arrive here daily after a trying trek across the border.

The mood at Mr. Roberto's headquarters was sullen, despite his confident words. The

National Front leader said that he was returning tomorrow to Angola for a one-day inspection of the situation.

At embassy chanceries here, the consensus is that National Front forces failed to resort to guerrilla ambushes behind the line of advance that might have prevented the Popular Front and Cuban troops from pushing unhindered up the principal roads.

Comments were equally negative on what was described as the sporadic support given by regular troops of the Zaire Army; such support was said to have been deficient in numbers and intensity. Other foreigners fighting with the National Front were reported to be limited to fewer than 100 Portuguese of rightist inclinations and a handful of mercenaries.

U.S. Reports Fighting

WASHINGTON, Jan. 16 (Reuters)—The State Department said today that the National Front for the Liberation of Angola was still fighting Cuban led forces in the northern part of the country.

Answering questions on the Angolan civil war, Robert L. Funseth, the department spokesman, said the fighting was continuing, but he termed the situation in the north as "serious."

Concern over the situation was expressed at the White House by the deputy Presidential press secretary, John G. Carlson, who said:

"The President will continue to work through diplomatic channels and use whatever means are available to him to see that this conflict can be resolved without foreign interference."

According to reports reaching here, the forces of the two Western supported movements, the National Front and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, were not so hard-pressed in southern and western parts of Angola, mainly because of the presence there of South African troops.