

Soviet Backed Group Posts Gains in Angola

From News Dispatches

The Soviet-backed Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola has scored major gains in the south of the former Portuguese colony, according to reports in widely scattered capitals.

At the same time there are indications that South Africa, which has been a principal ally of the Popular Movement's two battlefield opponents, may be about to pull its troops, estimated to number about 1,200, out of the war.

While the reports cannot be officially confirmed, the fact that they have gained currency in capitals hostile to the Popular Movement lends them some credibility.

In Washington, U.S. intelligence officials said they have received reports that South African military units have been ordered to withdraw from Angola, and sources said that the Western-backed forces in southern Angola would not be able to repel the more heavily armed Popular Movement troops and their Cuban allies without the South African support.

Sources in Johannesburg said that the South African Cabinet had decided early this week to pull out of the war. There has been considerable opposition within the country to involvement in Angola, and the South African Parliament is to convene Friday.

In the past few days there had been reports that South Africa was considering in-

creasing its involvement.

As the battlefield momentum swung in the Popular Movement's favor, their Soviet and Cuban backers were reported to be increasing their direct support.

A Soviet cargo ship believed to be carrying military equipment was sighted off the West African coast. It would be the fourth such ship to deliver military gear in little more than a week.

At the same time, Soviet jet transports were reported to be carrying about 200 fresh Cuban reinforcements a day to Popular Movement forces. U.S. sources estimate the total Cuban strength in Angola at more than 10,500 so far.

On the battlefield, sources in Lusaka, capital of Zambia, said that Popular Movement forces had captured Cela, a strategically vital town in southern Angola, and put the "white forces"—South Africans and mercenaries—into retreat.

There was no official confirmation of the reports in South Africa, but the reports were carried in the South African press.

Cela marked one corner of a triangle in which South African forces supporting the Popular Movement's two foes—the National Front for the Liberation of Angola and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA)—had concentrated their supply camps, according to the Rand Daily Mail.

The other two corners of the triangle, Santa Comba and Amboiva, were also reported to have fallen to the Popular Movement's powerful southern offensive.

Loss of this stronghold would leave open the road to Huambo, headquarters for UNITA, only 100 miles to the south. The Daily Mail said that the report, if true, represents "a shattering defeat for white intervention in Angola that is bound to have far-reaching repercussions on the war."

The Johannesburg Star said in an editorial, "It may be that South Africa should be preparing itself for a humiliating pullout."

Diplomatic sources in Lusaka said that UNITA has been "very successful" in recruiting mercenaries in Europe and Africa and predicted an influx of highly trained mercenaries in the next few days.

Radio Luanda reported, however, that the Popular Movement has formed an air force of supersonic warplanes, which would represent the first aerial force in the war to date.

Last week, the Popular Movement drove the National Front out of most of the northern part of the country, and there were reports yesterday that the Soviet-backed forces seemed likely to capture the two remaining towns in National Front control soon.