

Cuban Intervention in Angola

By Don Oberdorfer

Washington Post Staff Writer

Early last September five merchant ships loaded with Cuban troops, weapons and ammunition sailed from Cuban ports on a 6,000-mile voyage across the equatorial Atlantic to the continent of Africa. Their mission: to tip the scales of civil war in Angola.

Three weeks later, around the first of October, some of the ships arrived in the old coffee port of Porto Amboim south of the Angolan capital. Others landed at the Congolese port of Pointe Noire to the north. About the same time Cubana Airlines planes began ferrying Cuban army "volunteers" across the Atlantic on their way to battle in Angola.

By the end of October at least 4,000 Cuban troops had landed or were on their way in a steady stream of ships and planes, according to U.S. estimates. By the end of the year the number had grown to 7,500. Last week the Cuban troop commitment to Angola—no longer growing but not yet diminishing either—was estimated at 12,000 men, about one-eighth of Cuba's standing army.

The Cuban intervention, which turned the tide of battle in Angola, is an extraordinary event in post-war history. There is little precedent for it in the past behavior of either Latin American or Communist countries. Some believe it will turn out to be an isolated episode, while others believe it will begin a new phase in the cold war. Seldom has a military operation involving a limited number of regular troops raised so many questions in world capitals about motive, intentions and potential consequences.

Until recent weeks the circumstances and significance of the Cuban intervention was overshadowed in this country by the bruising debate between the executive branch and Congress are Angolan aid. Moreover, President Ford and Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger placed most of their emphasis on condemning the Soviet Union with lesser emphasis

Intrigues World

Capitals

on the Cuban "proxy army."

Though the Soviet role in supplying military equipment and some troop transportation remains important, there is growing attention in Washington to the role of the Cubans. State Department officials in the Latin American field now argue that the impetus for the Angolan intervention came more from Cuba than from Russia. Kissinger is reported to accept this view in private.

The theory of Cuban initiative is backed up by a report that a mission from the Moscow-oriented MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) was given a chilly reception in the Soviet capital last June in its search for military help. Some versions of the report say the MPLA was referred to the Cubans for possible help. In any case, American officials familiar with the available evidence do not believe that the Cubans were "pressured" by Moscow into furnishing men for the Angolan battlefields.

Silent about Cuban intervention during its early months Premier Fidel Castro has become increasingly vocal as his troops met with battlefield success. In an interview Jan. 16, Castro was quoted as saying his troops will continue to fight as long as the government of the People's Republic of Angola wants this." Castro, his government and the Communist Party organ Granma, declared last month that Cuba sent troops in response to a request from the Angolan MPLA faction, described in Cuban accounts as "the legitimate government" of the contested African state.

An official Cuban note to the United Nations in late January maintained its troops were sent only after South African forces launched a major drive into the heartland of Angola Oct. 23. Castro reportedly gave this version to visiting Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau in Havana recently. The chain of events as reconstructed by American officials contradicts this explanation, however.

The Cuban intervention,

surprising as it was to most of the world, arose from a long background of involvement with Africa. As Castro has noted, African blood runs abundantly through the veins of many Cubans. Cuba has provided advisers and small-scale assistance for more than a decade to a variety of African countries and independence movements. In 1965 the guerrilla hero, Ernesto (Che) Guevara reportedly fought for a time with insurgents in the Congo.

In his Jan. 16 interview with Milan's Corriere Della Sera, Castro said Cuba had been aiding the Angolan "liberation movement" for 10 years. Indications are this aid included instructors in Communist organization and tactics. Cuban style, and training of a few Angolan leaders in Cuba.

The Soviet Union had been supplying some arms to Angola's MPA since 1957, according to U.S. reports. China began supporting a rival independence faction, the FLNA (National Front for the Liberation of Angola), in 1973 with military advisers and some equipment. The United States had given secret subsidies since the early 1960s to FLNA leader Holden Roberto. As Portugal prepared to pull out of its Angolan territory by last Nov. 11, the struggle between factions and their international backers intensified.

Fighting broke out between rival groups last March, becoming more serious in the spring and summer. According to Cuba's deputy prime minister, Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, Cuba sent 230 military advisers late last spring at the request of the MPLA leader, Dr. Antonio Agostinho Neto. They set up four training centers for Angolan fighters, Rodriguez said.

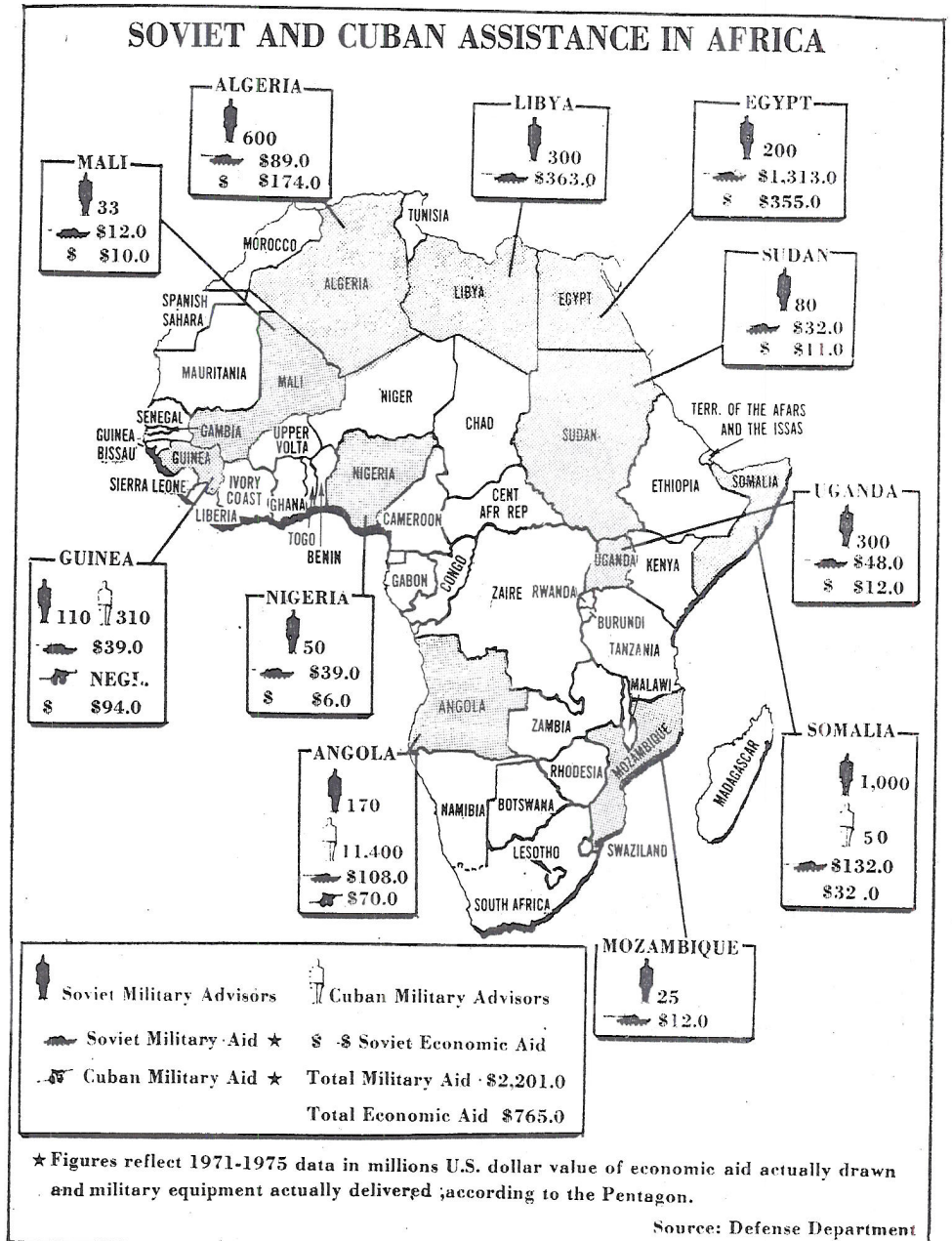
It was in early June, according to U.S. sources, that the MPLA delegation visited Moscow in an unsuccessful attempt to obtain direct Soviet involvement in the Angolan struggle. Sometime the same month a Cuban mission including a member of the Communist Party central committee with military responsibilities met the MPLA's chief, U.S. reports said. It is surmised—but not established—that Cuban intervention was discussed.

(In Washington about the same time the United States sharply increased support to its insurgents. The report of the House Intelligence Committee said the CIA prepared a proposal last June for \$6 million to pro-American elements in Angola, which was approved in revised form as a \$14 million program by President Ford and the Forty Committee of the National Security Council in July.)

The timing of Castro's decision to send ground

troops to Angola is not definitely known, and is the subject of some debate in U.S. government circles. Working back from the departure of ships in the first week of September it seems likely that Castro's decision could not have been later than late July or early August. By mid-August, according to a U.S. report, regular troops in Cuba were being canvassed for volunteers willing to fight in Angola.

The mid-summer of 1975 was notable as the high point of a developing rapprochement between Cuba and the United States. In



By Joseph P. Mastrangelo—The Washington Post

late July the United States had voted with the majority in the Organization of American States to lift the political sanctions against longstanding economic and political sanctions against Cuba. Cuba responded by returning \$2 million in ransom paid for a hijacked airliner three years before. The United States in late August lifted a ban on exports to Cuba for foreign subsidiaries of U.S. firms. There was widespread talk of further moves leading to restoration of relations.

Within months this movement would be stopped short by the Angolan intervention. Some State Department experts believe Castro may not have been ready for full bilateral relations, including the risks accompanying a U.S. presence. Others believe a desire to improve U.S. relations was outweighed by an allegiance to the Communist camp, dependence on the Soviet Union, aspirations as leader of the Third World and longstanding ties to the Angolan insurgents.

Castro himself later declared that the possibility of full relations with the United States never did exist because Washington's asking price was too high. In the Italian interview he said "Cuba is asked to renounce its foreign policy" to mend relations. He said it is "impossible" for Cuba to refrain from aid to countries such as Angola which are attacked by "Fascism, racism and imperialism."

In view of the situation on the ground in Angola, Castro's decisions to intervene—like those of the United States in Vietnam—may have been taken step by step rather than all at once. While the flow of Cuban troops reportedly did not slacken once it had begun, some U.S. officials believe Castro may not have intended initially to send 12,000 men, but was led by circumstance to increase his investment.

Sometime in August South African troops crossed the Angolan border to protect power plants serving South African-controlled Namibia. Late in October the South Africans intervened on a full-scale basis, moving into south central Angola. They soon clashed

with Cuban regulars in a series of pitched battles. The United States then increased its covert aid to pro-U.S. Angolan factions. The Soviet Union redoubled its sharply increasing supply of military equipment.

U.S. officials said the Cubans brought some of their equipment with them by sea and air, and acquired other gear—including most tanks, 122mm rockets and other heavy weapons—from Soviet supply lines in Africa. The American belief is that Russia agreed to replenish any weapons, ammunition or other supplies expanded from Cuban stocks.

The turning point of the Angolan civil war came Dec. 19 in Washington, when the U.S. Senate voted to bar further covert aid to American-backed factions. China had already begun to withdraw its aid, evidently on grounds that the anti-Soviet forces could not win.

A month after the U.S. decision, South African troops began to pull back, leaving the Cubans free to move against the remaining African forces and groups of mercenaries with relative impunity.

Early in January, following the U.S. congressional decision, Soviet IL-62 transports with Russian pilots began ferrying additional Cuban troops nonstop across the Atlantic to Angola. This airlift became necessary as the United States managed to deny Cuban planes the use of most of the third-country refueling points which previously had been used by the short-range Cuban airplanes.

Some 4,500 Cuban troops are reported to have been sent to Angola during January. At the same time, the Russians augmented \$200 million in military equipment with \$100 million more, according to an estimate made public by Kissinger. "Cuba scored a military victory, backed by the Soviet Union. Almost all of the fighting was done by Cuban forces," Kissinger said last week.

As of late last week, there was no indication that the Cubans had begun to withdraw from the Angolan battlefield, and there was increasing speculation in Washington about the future. Having installed the

MPLA as winner of the Angolan civil war, Cuban forces may find it difficult to withdraw quickly. Some American officials believe Cuba is likely to leave large numbers of advisers and a substantial military presence. But if Cuban regulars remain to hold the cities and strategic points, they may well become objects of ambush and attack from guerrillas of rival African factions who are regrouping in the bush.

A possibility of growing concern is that Cuban forces now in Angola might be used elsewhere in Africa—perhaps against neighboring Zaire or Zambia, in the French-Somalian dispute in Djibouti, or the little desert war between Algeria and Morocco in the Spanish Sahara.

A likelier possibility might be a Cuban-backed move against South Africa's Namibia colony just across the Angola border, leading to eventual assault on South Africa itself.

The intervention in Angola is not universally approved in Cuba, where reports of casualties have seeped through censorship and media control. The idea that tiny Cuba has undertaken a job as a world policeman—whatever the rhetoric of the government and party—might not be popular with the Cuban masses. There is no hint from Castro that he plans to continue military actions in Africa, but neither is there a promise to withdraw.

Some 25,000 Brazilian troops joined the allied fight in Italy in World War II and a 1,000-man Colombian battalion showed the flag with the U.S. side in Korea. Otherwise Latin Americans have not fought and died on other continents. There is no precedent for Latin forces undertaking an overseas fight on their own initiative. Nor is there a precedent for a meshing of Soviet equipment and national Communist fighters in major battle thousands of miles from the territory of either one.

Whatever its future, the Cuban intention in Angola is the object of intense interest on several continents. In a world beset with conflict, it is something new under the sun.