

Castro's Comeback

By Jim Hoagland
Washington Post

Paris

"We don't know anything about desert fighting," a Cuban official stationed in Europe said with a sly smile as he dismissed reports that Cuban soldiers are aiding Arab guerrillas in the Western Sahara. "The jungle is our bag."

The Cuban military victory over American-supported African factions in Angola has inspired much more than such bits of diplomatic machismo in Cuban embassies abroad.

It has sharply boosted Prime Minister Fidel Castro's stock with revolutionary regimes and movements throughout the Third World, where the Cuban presence has been growing quietly but rapidly in recent years. Suddenly, Castro, an obviously isolated figure at the 1973 summit conference of nonaligned nations in Algiers, looms large again in Africa and the Middle East.

The Angolan success is the most visible foreign effort Castro has ever undertaken. But the networks of Cubans working abroad are active and farflung, according to diplomatic and intelligence sources in Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

The pattern of Cuban involvement elsewhere in Africa and the Middle East suggests that Castro will want to keep an important presence in Angola for some time. This would enable him to savor a long-overdue victory, to continue to refurbish his tarnished credentials in Latin America by showing his influence elsewhere and to remain in position for further kicks to the groin of the United States and its "imperialistic" allies.

In contrast to the suggestions from Washington that Castro is paying a political debt to the Soviet Union by allowing his troops to be used to fight in Angola, European diplomats with long experience in Cuban affairs — as well as Commu-

nist bloc sources — suggest that the Soviets have more often restrained Castro from undertaking spectacular foreign adventures, especially in Latin America.

Still, Cuban security men are now helping Algeria's internal security apparatus. In Congo-Brazzaville, Cuban agricultural experts have established a new system of growing sugar cane. Mechanics from Havana maintain Soviet-made tanks and jets in Somalia and South Yemen. In Conarky, Guinea, Cuban teachers have established a Marxist ideological center for Africans.

Their imprint is seen in Europe, too. Cuban intelligence has long used a Paris travel agency as a cover for recruiting European leftists to their cause by enticing them with cut-rate trips to Havana. Cuban diplomats here have maintained close links to Latin American extremists, including "Carlos," the Venezuelan terrorist who led the assault in December on the

Vienna headquarters of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries.

The continuing spread into the armies of developing countries of sophisticated Soviet weapons that need outside maintenance expertise and training¹ has helped implant Castro's soldiers and mechanics around the Third World.

The darker-skinned, Spanish-speaking Cubans are far more acceptable to many Third-World leaders concerned about their non-aligned images than would be a growth in the number of Soviet advisers these leaders most, according to European and African diplomats.

The stationing of some 3000 to 4000 Cuban military men in at least seven African and Arab countries other than Angola is also an efficient way for Cuba to repay at least a fraction of the enormous debt contracted to the Soviet Union for

Through

Wed., Mar. 3, 1976 San Francisco Chronicle 11

Angola

its economic help since 1959, these sources feel.

But the driving force behind the expanding Cuban presence abroad is undoubtedly Castro's revolutionary mystique, which has failed to make a major impact closer to home in the Caribbean and Latin America but which is paying important dividends in other former colonial areas where the United States has less room to maneuver.

Guinea's President Sekou Toure "loved the idea of being linked with a small country that had stood up to the giant of imperialism, the United States," says a diplomat who watched the arrival of Cuban instructors to establish the ideological institute in Conakry in 1968.

There are reports that Toure has Cubans in his personal body guard because he mistrusts his own people.

Castro and his charismatic lieu-

tenant in exporting revolution, Ernesto Che Guevara, who helped forge the Cuban political link to Africa in 1965 before going to Bolivia and his death, began preaching the need for a Third-World "common front to fight against imperials" almost from the beginning of their own revolution.

"The ghetto feeling that the American quarantine and the heavy dependence on the Soviet Union imposed on Cuba's leaders has to be understood," says a French official who lived in Cuba in the mid-1960s. "They had to find a way to break out."

Their successful guerrilla war and defiance of the United States facilitated contacts with African revolutionary movements and governments that had just wrested their own independence from colonial powers.

Castro's apparent inability to back up his bombast with action sharply undermined his credibility

in the Third World, however. He found few defenders at the Algiers nonaligned summit when he was openly attacked by Cambodia's Norodom Sihanouk and Libya's Moammar Khadafy as a false revolutionary prophet.

Any Soviet restraints that may have existed were clearly lifted in Angola, where Moscow's and Havana's objectives appear to have coincided in saving the Marxist-oriented Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola from defeat and then awarding the movement a military victory over its rivals.

Castro's deep plunge into Africa and the Soviet willingness to risk detente over Angola have stunned pro-Western African countries and their European friends.

In France, officials confide that concern about the possibility of Cuban troops moving against the white-minority governments controlling Rhodesia and Southwest Africa was an important factor in France's haste to recognize the Popular Movement and, presumably, to gain some leverage over "a rapidly deteriorating situation in which we do not know the intentions of the Cubans."

Bonn has reacted by holding up small separate foreign aid packages that were to be granted to Cuba and Angola this year, and is pushing for an important joint common Market aid package that might influence the Popular Movement's decision on asking the Cubans to stay or leave.

The Angolan expedition is a sharp departure from the decade-old Cuban involvement in Africa because of its size, visibility and use. The Cubans fought as coordinated infantry and tank units. Intelligence sources say the Cuban troops engaged in few direct clashes with white south South African units and remain an untested element in widening the conflict in southern Africa.



Cuban and MPLA troops relaxed after capturing the seaside town of Ambrizete in Angola