

Sights and Sound of War Prove Elusive in Angola

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NAIROBI, Kenya, Dec. 30— One of the more bizarre aspects of the war in Angola is that hardly anyone has seen it.

In the month and a half since the Portuguese withdrew and factional skirmishing has widened into a civil war, the fighting has been largely confined to remote areas where battling armies are contesting critical road junctions. Journalists have been kept away from all fronts by the three warring factions.

In fact, were it not for the sounds of shelling that may be heard in some places, the sight of an occasional wounded soldier or the litter of mortar shells that line some accessible roads, it would be difficult to guarantee absolutely that there was a war going on.

"I've been waiting for two weeks to see action," said a French photographer recently in Huambo, joint headquarters of the National Front for the Liberation of Angola and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola.

"They promise and they promise and meanwhile they take me for tourist junkets to

nice towns and cities where the people come out to cheer the leaders."

Similar complaints were voiced in Luanda, where the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola is in control and where it closely monitors and circumscribes the activities of journalists.

Presumably the reluctance of all sides to permit visits to the battlefields is based on a desire to keep outside support out of view. The Popular Movement, which has confirmed its use of Cubans as soldiers, is still reluctant to specify the numbers or the extent of involvement. The two other factions have been even less candid about the roles of South African troops that are known

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to be fighting, if not with them, then at least against the same enemy.

Consequently, even within Angola, information on the fighting is limited to secondary sources: leaders of the factions, soldiers returned from the front or a few committed journalists, such as the Tass correspondent in Luanda, who are on occasion taken on tours approaching the combat zones.

But obviously the war is there. On the basis of interviews, what kind of war it is can only be sketched out. For example, a South African military analyst reported that until recently there were relatively few losses on any side. He said that in all probability more people were killed and wounded in fighting in the cities before the Portuguese withdrawal than in battles since then.

He said the opposing factions had few men trained in mobile mechanized warfare and, with the introduction of Soviet missiles and lesser amounts of Western weaponry, the armies came to rely heavily on outsiders.

In the earphases, the analyst and his Angolan counterparts in Luanda agreed, the war was measured largely in decibels. Under an ineffective but loud and whistling barrage of 122-mm Soviet missiles, the untrained troops of the National Front or the National Union withdrew.

Similarly, a small column that began with 26 armored cars and reportedly with no more than 150 whites—some said Portuguese, other South Africans—was able in mid-November to repulse Popular Movement forces from the southwestern part of the country, capturing a relatively large town like Moçamedes without firing a shot.

Fighting Around Quibala

That column stalled as it moved toward Dondo, a town where a dam supplies electricity to Luanda. For weeks the battle has centered on Quibala, on the road to Dondo, with Angolans replacing the white column.

Sources in Angola and South Africa say that the psychological advantage of the modern weapons has worn thin. Soldiers on both sides are digging in, and there has been an in-

crease of fatalities. Yesterday Pretoria announced that three South Africans had been killed.

Two weeks ago, when the National Union announced that its forces had taken Luso, on the Benguela railroad, Miguel N'zau Puna, the second in command, reportedly wept in talking about heavy losses. Similar battles are now going on around Teixeira de Sousa, farther east on the railroad, on the Zaire border.

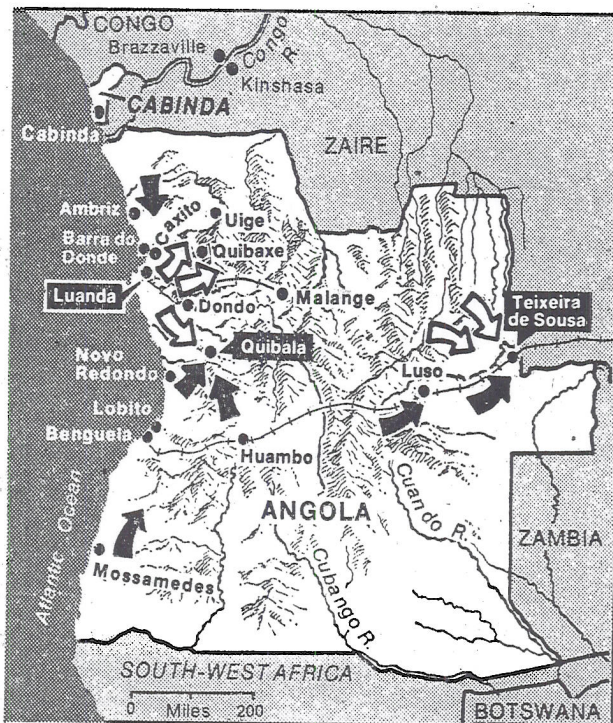
There is a third front, north of Luanda, where forces of the National Front, concentrated largely at Ambriz are facing Popular Movement troops that have drawn a defense perimeter from Barra do Donde, on the

coast to Caxito and Quibaxe.

Caxito commands a critical road leading north to Uige, is the National Front headquarters. A road to the south is the best approach to Luanda.

Because of lack of pontoons needed to cross rivers, there is little movement aside from the roads. The northwest is peppered with marshes that prevent mobile advance even if tanks were available. Elsewhere mountains and desert also impede cross-country attacks.

According to strategists in Kinshasa, Nairobi and Pretoria,



Angolan fighting, between forces of Popular Movement (white arrows) and allied National Front and National Union (black arrows), has reportedly centered recently in Luanda area and at Quibala and Teixeira de Sousa.

the outcome will depend largely on infantry troops sufficiently disciplined to hold the positions they take. This aspect of the war is expected to become more important as the dread of whistling missiles diminishes.

Air power, either helicopters or jets, may psychologically demoralize ground troops. The only confirmed aerial assault so far was that by a National Front pilot who used a single-engine plane to throw dynamite at the Popular Movement's radio tower in Luanda and then flew over the city dropping propaganda leaflets.

Offensive Is Expected

According to a report from South Africa, the Popular Movement may be preparing an offensive in an attempt to seize as much territory as it can before the African heads of state meet in Addis Ababa next week to debate the Angola question.

The Popular Movement is said to be planning to use Soviet equipment, including tanks and MIG-21 jets as well as surface-to-surface missiles. Reports that MIG-21's are based in the Congo have been circulating in Kinshasa and Huambo for some time. In South Africa, intelligence sources said recently that Portuguese pilots now with the Popular Movement are being trained to fly MIG's.

In Luanda, in November, there was another widely circulated report that President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire had Mirage fighters that he would commit to battle on the side of the National Front. Zaire did obtain five Mirages in early December, but it seems unlikely that these costly planes would be risked in Angola.