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A Reversal in Fight For New Country

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The Angolan fighting appears to be turning in favor of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA).

Its opponents, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), have been thrown onto the defensive in the country's three main war zones.

This amounts to a major reversal of fortunes since independence day last November 11. At that time, FNLA troops were poised only 18 miles north of Luanda, the capital of the MPLA's Popular Republic. Intermittently, FNLA assaults managed to cut off the city's water supply from the pumping station at Quifangondo.

Now, on the northern front, the MPLA has pushed the FNLA from the Quifangondo area, taken Caxito (20 miles further north) and advanced up the roads toward the FNLA strongholds of Ambriz and Carmona.

The MPLA has also stopped the previously rapid advance of UNITA, FNLA and South African troops from the south. Here, a joint armored column had succeeded in ejecting the MPLA from Sa da Bandeira, Mocamedes, Benguela, Lobito and Novo Redondo between September and the first week of November. Now the column has ground to a halt. The MPLA blew up the bridges on the River Queve, north of Novo Redondo, to prevent the force reaching the next city up the coast, Porto Amboim.

A UNITA-FNLA-South African force trying to reach Luanda's main source of electricity at Dondo has also been stalled, near Gabela, due east of Porto Amboim. And, troops trying to break through MPLA defenses on the main road to Luanda from the UNITA-FNLA capital at Huambo have been stopped in their tracks around Cela and Santa Comba.

One of UNITA's biggest setbacks has been its failure to reopen the Benguela Railway. This had once seemed only a matter of time after

the movement, which always controlled the central stretch of the railway through Huambo and Silva Porto, seized the western end of the line at Lobito and Benguela with FNLA and South African help in the first week of November.

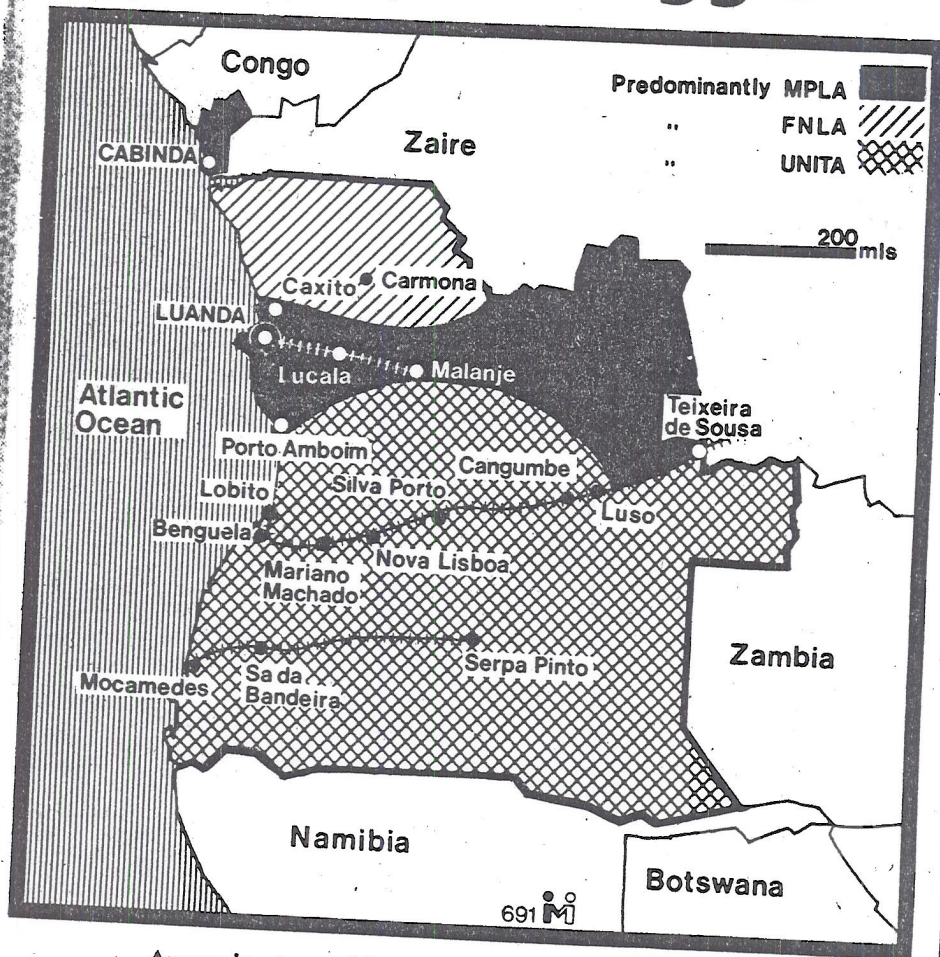
Since then, however, the movement has been singularly incapable of winning and holding the eastern end of the railway between Luso and Teixeira de Sousa, near the Zaire border. The railway has now been closed since August, a major economic disaster for Zaire and Zambia which used the railway to export a large part of their copper. Zambia traditionally exported more than 45 per cent of its copper along the line. And more than 140,000 tons of imports destined for Zambia are stranded at Lobito port unable to be railfreighted out.

The FNLA and UNITA military setbacks are not just due to the arrival of sophisticated Soviet military hardware and Cuban advisers on the MPLA side. They also reflect the popular opposition facing the UNITA-FNLA-South African column on the southern front since it moved beyond areas of strong traditional loyalty to UNITA (like Lobito) into MPLA zones of influence (north of Novo Redondo).

On December 18, in Kinshasa, Jonas Savimbi, president of UNITA, denied once again — as he has on numerous occasions in the past weeks — that his movement was receiving South African backing, though he granted that South African troops had entered the country. But now very few informed observers would believe him.

During a visit to UNITA-held areas of Angola in November, I saw South Africans driving armored cars with "Viva UNITA" slogans daubed on them at Silva Porto airport, over 400 miles north of the border with Namibia (South West Africa). I saw South African troops, again with armored cars, working side by side with UNITA and FNLA troops at Benguela airport, also 400 miles north of the border.

Angola Struggle



Approximate positions of liberation movements in Angola

AP Wirephoto