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Anti-Marxists On Defense in North Angola

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KINSHASA, Zaire, Jan. 22 — The Western-backed National Front for the Liberation of Angola was reported today to be organizing what may prove to be its last stand inside northern Angola south of San Salvador, the old Bakongo capital.

But Western diplomats and other sources doubt that the group can hold the city, which is the hometown of its leader, Holden Roberto.

At the same time, conflicting reports continued to reach here regarding which faction now controls Cela, in southern Angola. The Soviet-supported Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola claims to have captured the small town, about 120 miles north of Huambo (formerly Nova Lisboa), but the Western-supported groups deny that Cela has fallen.

At least until recently, Cela was a forward base of operations for South African troops involved in the fighting in southern Angola and a staging area for the stalled northern drive of allied forces of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the National Front.

But no independent account of the exact battle situation in southern Angola is available here.

In northern Angola, the battered National Front army reportedly now controls only about a 60-mile-wide stretch of territory south of the Zaire border, plus several other ill-defined regions in the northeast.

National Front spokesmen here refused to say precisely where their new defense lines are, but indicate that they are miles south of San Salvador, itself only 45 miles from the Zaire border. The town's significance in the war is probably more emotional than strategic, because it is the historic capital of the Bakongo people who are the main supporters of the National Front.

San Salvador is said to be jammed with more than 15,000 refugees from the war in the north and suffering from an acute food shortage that has caused some deaths among babies and old people.

National Front spokesmen here report that Roberto himself has been spending much time lately in San Salvador rallying his 3,000 to 6,000 troops in that area and studying the possibility of launching a counter-offensive against the Popular Movement army, which has now penetrated deep into northern Angola.

But Western diplomatic and other sources here appear generally pessimistic about the National Front's ability even to hold on to San

Salvador or Sao Antonio do Zaire, the other major town still in its hands in the extreme northwestern corner of Angola.

The Popular Movement, these sources say, has assembled vastly superior firepower, including Soviet tanks, and can probably push through to the Zaire border if it chooses.

In addition, the National Front insists that its army is up against the bulk of Cuban troops fighting in Angola for the Popular Movement. Their number is now estimated here at anywhere from 10,000 to 12,000.

The continuing northward push of the Popular Movement is now being held back mainly by blown bridges and logistical problems rather than by the new defense lines of the National Front, according to Western sources.

Meanwhile, a National Front delegation, led by Foreign Minister Hendrik Val Neto, has left here for Washington with an urgent request to key congressional leaders for more American military assistance.

National Front spokesmen here have been stressing in conversations with journalists that they want only "open" and "direct" aid from the United States and an end to covert assistance through the Central Intelligence Agency.

There is deep resentment now among National Front leaders over American press reports of secret CIA involvement with their group and a general feeling that the front has been forced to pay the price of an internal American row over the agency's activities in the Ford administration's policy in Angola.

"We never asked that your aid be secret and we did not know the Americans we were dealing with were CIA agents," said one spokesman. "We had asked for official American aid," he said.

In a related development, William J. Coughlin, a staff aide to Sen. John D. Tunney (D-Calif.) left here for Nairobi and Lusaka today after two days of talks about Angola with top officials of the National Front and the Zaire government.

Tunney, who sponsored the Senate amendment cutting off covert American military assistance to the two pro-Western Angolan factions, has sent Coughlin and another aide, Mark Moran, on a fact-finding trip to Angola.

Moran is in Luanda, the Angolan capital, for talks with Popular Movement leaders.

The two aides are trying to assess the course of the war and to determine what happened to the \$25 million to \$32 million the CIA gave the National Front and UNITA.