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Failure in Angola

How Side Backed by U.S. Crumbled

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KINSHASA—At a rusted red gate on the dark, tree-shaded Avenue Plateau in midtown Kinshasa, a guard dressed in camouflage jungle dress and beret opens a small peephole and looks out. Satisfied with the identity card, he unsmilingly opens the door and allows

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the visitor to step through into the crumbling world of the National Front for the Liberation of Angola.

Downcast African and Portuguese refugees wander about the big compound, mixing with war veterans hobbling along on crutches or heavily bandaged. Babies cry. Officials scurry from building to building. Soldiers talk in hushed voices about the latest news from the battlefield.

The compound is crowded with trucks, water and gaso-



HOLDEN ROBERTO
... ignored advisers

line tankers, buses with Angolan license plates, jeeps and Land Rovers in various stages of disrepair.

This is the Kinshasa headquarters—and last retreat—of the Western-backed National Front—a mass of be-

See **FRONT**, A12, Col. 1

FRONT, From A1

wildered refugees, soldiers, wounded veterans and officials all wondering what went wrong and what will happen to them now.

For the past two months, the news from northern Angola has been of one disaster after another—Caxito, Ambriz, Ambrizete, Camabatel, Carmona and Negage and now Santo Antonio do Zaire and Sao Salvador, towns that were once strongpoints in the National Front domain that only last November stretched from the Zairian border to within 35 miles of Luanda, the Angolan capital.

All these towns have since fallen in rapid succession to the National Front's rival, Soviet- and Cuban-backed Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola. The National Front has been completely wiped off the Angolan political map, probably forever.

The rise and fall of the National Front, the Angolan faction the United States chose to back, was spectacular.

Less than two years ago, this nationalist group could rightfully boast of being the strongest of the three rival factions that had been fighting to oust the Portuguese from Angola since 1961.



Christian Science Monitor photos

Two well-armed soldiers with pro-Western nationalist forces in Angola pose for cameras.

When Lisbon was rocked by a military coup in April 1974, the National Front had by far the largest army (6,000 to 8,000), the greatest degree of natural cohesion (almost entirely Bakongo people and affiliated tribes) and an undisputed, iron-fisted, strong-willed leader in Holden Roberto.

By contrast, the Popular Movement was a mess—rent by internal ideological divisions and an unresolved struggle for power among half a dozen men while its guerrilla war inside Angola had practically come to a standstill. Even the Soviet Union had given up on it.

The National Front also had important foreign allies, beginning with neighboring Zaire, which provided training camps, military instructors, arms, logistical and diplomatic support and a 1,600-mile border from which to launch guerrilla attacks against the Portuguese.

In addition, it could boast of important friends in both the East and the West. China had sent 119 military instructors to train the guerrillas and provided tons of arms. The United States, through the Central Intelligence Agency, had given small amounts of money off and on almost since the National Front's inception.

Indeed, Holden Roberto had the distinction of being not only "Uncle Sam's man in Angola" but also Peking's.

Again by contrast, the Popular Movement had no friendly neighboring country from which to operate except the Congo, which only made possible attacks into the isolated enclave of Cabinda. Its main foreign backers were half a dozen radical African states far from Angola, plus distant Cuba.

What then happened to the National Front? Why did the largest and most cohesive Angolan faction end up the least effective? Why did it fail to emerge as the dominant party when it had so many initial advantages over the rival Popular Movement?

To hear National Front officials here tell it, none of the faults was theirs. The Soviet Union showered the Popular Movement with sophisticated weapons like the 122-mm, and "Stalin Organ" rockets, tanks, Migs and armored cars. The Cubans

threw practically their entire Angolan force of 10,000 to 12,000 soldiers behind the Popular Movement's northern offensive into National Front territory beginning in December.

The National Front, on the other hand, got few modern weapons to match the Popular Movement's arsenal, and much of the heavy weaponry it did have was in the hands of Zairians, Portuguese and other foreigners.

Then there was the treacherous Western press, strangely enough led by the Americans, which participated in a deliberate campaign to discredit the National Front through scandalous and unfounded stories of CIA funding even of its president and of white mercenaries supposedly running its army. "There was a plot to liquidate you and you American journalists were part of it," said one bitter front official here.

But this self-serving account of the National Front's failure does not explain why it was already losing ground rapidly to the Popular Movement by the end of last summer—before more than a few hundred Cubans were in Angola and before the Soviet Union began pouring in heavy arms.

According to most Western journalists, diplomatic observers, Portuguese military officers and other assorted observers of the National Front, the key problems lay much closer to nesses in the leadership, structure and motivation of its organization, in its narhome. There were weakrow ethnic base and in its faulty alliances with other Angolan political leaders.

To begin with, Holden Roberto practically had to be kicked out of Kinshasa last spring by Zairian President Sese Seko Mobutu before he would return to Angola to lead his own followers. Even then, it was not to be a triumphal entry into the capital as the leaders of the other two groups had made months before his belated return.

Instead, Roberto stayed within the safe confines of the front's northern domain and went to the battle front at Caxito, 35 miles north of Luanda, to play the role of commander-in-chief of his troops.

The reason for his behavior, according to his lieutenants, was that Roberto feared assassination if he set foot inside Luanda or outside his own turf. But the result was a major loss of face in the eyes of many Angolans, even among his supporters.

A shy introvert who seemed always to be hiding his true personality behind his ever-present dark glasses, the 53-year old Bakongo tribal chief from San Salvador (the old Bankongo capital) proved a disaster as a military commander.

Essentially, he offered tribal-style leadership to a would-be conventional army, and the two never meshed. He distrusted his Portuguese advisers—even his chief of staff, Col. Santos E. Casto—and feared the formation of a strong general staff organization that might threaten him.

He was unable to impart motivation or ideological fervor to his troops, and his army reamined sluggish, lacking in indoctrination and unprofessional except for a few elite commando units. To the bitter end, the 122-mm rocket, a noisy but relatively ineffectual weapon, sowed utter panic in the ranks of his troops who never became accustomed to conventional warfare.

Contrary to what many Western press reports alleged, Roberto never wanted anything to do with white mercenaries and so never allowed more than about 150 Portuguese, many of them Angolan-born or bred, into his northern army. Some observers felt it was a question of distracts, others that it was racism of his part.

Whatever the reason, Roberto had no corps of hardened white mercenaries to spearhead his columns, as did his ally, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (unita), in southern Angola. This considerably weakened the offensive capability of his northern army, according to Portuguese and other Western military observers.

When Roberto did decide to take on several hundred white Europeans in January, it was too little and too late to salvage his crumbling army. His mercenary policy was a fiasco.

Roberto's undoing can be traced back to August, when the last of his beaten troops were pushed out of Luanda, leaving the capital entirely in the hands of the Popular Movement. At that point Zairian President Mobutu is said to have concluded that Roberto would never become the leader of Angola and to have begun swinging his military aid to the unita army in the south.

Whether the CIA led the way or simply followed Zaire in this switch is not clear, but after August both Zaire and the agency were clearly disillusioned with the National Front and eager to bolster UNITA, until then badly neglected.

Without a doubt, the worst military judgment Roberto made in his short career as commander-in-chief came on Nov. 10, the eve of Angola's independence. He tried to send a single column of several thousand troops down the road from Caxito to seize Quifangondo, where Luanda's water supplies are located, only 12 miles from the outskirts of the capital.

Disregarding the advice of his Portuguese military advisers, according to a Portuguese journalist who was present, Roberto did not even attempt any diversionary tactics or flanking moves, and his compact, single column was torn apart in hail of 122mm. rockets. His troops retreated in disarray with heavy casualties.

The defeat marked the beginning of the end of the National Front in the north.

Thereafter the initiative was taken over by the Popular Movement's army, which began encircling front forces in Caxito and cutting its supply lines to the north.

There were other problems, too. One of the worst of these was Daniel Chi-

penda, a maverick guerrilla leader who split off from the Popular Movement after losing a leadership struggle in the summer of 1974. Chipenda joined the National Front with about 2,000 to 3,000 soldiers last spring.

Chipenda made use of his close ties with the South Africans, Portuguese rightists and mercenary circles to put together his own independent army in southern Angola in the name of the National Front.

When the National Front finally formed an alliance last fall with southern-based UNITA, it was Chipenda who carried the burden of trying to make it work on the ground in joint military maneuvers and deployment of troops.

But the "Chipenda Army" proved to be anything but an asset. It spent more time looting, robbing banks, raping and fighting UNITA forces than it did battling the Popular Movement.

Finally, in January, after a Christmas Eve shootout in Huambo, all hell broke loose between Chipenda's unruly forces and UNITA local commanders, who decided to drive the National Front out of southern Angola. Chipenda fled to Kinshasa, where he continued his wheeling and dealing with white mercenaries.

Another serious failing of the National Front was its handling of the Western

opportunistic. After all, had not Roberto befriended Peking? Had not both the Chinese and the North Koreans helped to train the front's army? And had not the front deliberately portrayed itself as pro-Chinese in its guerrilla strategy?

The front's mishandling of press relations seemed sometimes astounding. At the African summit on Angola in Addis Ababa last month, the front was the one Angolan faction that held no press conference to defend its cause, despite Roberto's presence there.

Later, in January, the front sent a high level delegation to Washington in an unprecedented open attempt to lobby for aid with Congress. But at the same time, when it desperately needed press coverage to prove it still existed, front leaders here refused to make any effort to take correspondents of The Washington Post and The New York Times into northern Angola.

In the end, the front proved as inept in the propaganda war as on the battlefield, where the Popular Movement won an amazing number of victories by default.

In the final weeks, the front army often did not even bother to fight and sometimes simply abandoned town 24 hours or more before the popular Movement actually arrived.

The National Front army was apparently not alone to blame for the unseemly rout of its forces from the north, according to Western journalists and Portuguese refugee accounts.

The Zairian army, which was supposed to have provided artillery and armored vehicle support, also fled and in many cases fled first, leaving the front's army without any defense against the Popular Movement's rocket fire and tanks.

Refugees and several correspondents present during the evacuation from Camabatela, Negage and Uige say the behavior of the Zairian soldiers was far more reprehensible than the National Front army's.

Zairian officers, they say,

looted houses for furniture and rounded up cattle to take back to sell on the meat-short Kinshasa market. "I never saw one of them shoot off a shot except to kill cows," said a French journalist who asked not to be identified.

According to Portuguese refugee accounts, Zairian troops in one case staged mock raid on a village posing as Popular Movement soldiers to frighten the inhabitants away so they could loot their homes.

When planes loaded with supplies landed at Negage airfield, itself totally stripped of all valuable equipment by Zairian army personnel, there were struggles between the Zairians and National Front soldiers to see who would get the fuel and arms that were aboard. "I don't think the Zairians have many friends among front soldiers" said the French journalist.

While front officials will never say so publicly, several here commented in private that they doubt that all of the arms supposedly sent by the United States and other Western powers reached them. They believe, without having any definite proof, that some of their arms were quietly stolen, or bought, as they passed through various European and Zairian army intermediaries.

But these same officials say they are also convinced that Zairian President Mobutu was unaware of what was going on and would never have permitted it.

Whatever the truth about what happened to its arms, it is certain that the National Front got little help from the Zairian army when it faced its toughest hours of the war.

It is unlikely that the 1,200 to 1,500 Zairian soldiers, with their light Panhard armored cars and only a few heavy artillery pieces, could have done more than delay the Popular Movement's advance if they had dug in and fought alongside the front army. But without their help, the front's position was hopeless.