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“Latin-African” Solidarity – The Cuban Civilian Mission in Angola, 1975-1991

From 1975 to 1991, almost 500,000 Cubans were actively involved in the Angolan independence struggle and in building up Angola as an independent nation. Most of them were soldiers, but they also included doctors, teachers, building workers, and technicians. On account both of its scope and duration and of its wide-ranging operational areas, this Cuban overseas mission marks a new departure in African-Latin American history as well as underlining the historic importance of transatlantic South-South relations. Many of the Cubans who served in Angola were descendants of African slaves deported to Cuba between the 16th and 19th centuries. It was to this historic fact that Fidel Castro was alluding when, at the Communist Party Conference at the end of 1975, he defined Cuba as a “Latin-African Nation”. For Castro, the logical consequence was not simply a moral obligation, but an obligation based on blood relationship, to defend Cuba’s “Angolan brothers and sisters” against the “racist and imperialist forces of the South African apartheid regime”:

“In the fulfilment of our duties which arise from our principles, our ideology, our convictions, and our very own blood, we have the obligation to defend Angola and Africa.”

The mission in Angola was named “Operación Carlota” after a female slave by the name of Carlota, who had led a slaves’ revolt in 1843 in the province of

Matanzas. This appeal by Castro to the historic obligation of the Cuban nation initially appears to have fallen on fertile ground – by the first half of 1976 there were already more than 20,000 Cubans doing active service in Angola.

Up until now, however, the main focus of attention has been exclusively on the military aspect of Cuban involvement, since the independence struggle in Angola developed into one of the major proxy wars during the Cold War in Africa. Although Cuban civilians constituted one tenth of all those involved in the mission, only marginal reference, if any, is ever made to the work they did or to their direct assistance in building up the new Angolan state. And yet, especially in the medical sector, a major factor behind the almost legendary reputation Cuba enjoys among the developing nations lies in the work of the civilian internationalists, still present today in a large number of African states. There is a powerful symbolism inherent in Cuban civilian auxiliary aid and, up to the present day, it remains an important part of Cuban foreign policy.

Cuban aid to rebuild Angola and to meet basic needs and Cuba’s Third World politics

To an extent hitherto unknown among countries in the Southern hemisphere, Cuba won political influence, prestige and popularity as a result of the assistance it gave, especially in Africa – not least because the operations met what were, literally, vitally important needs among the young African nations: medical care, education, civil engineering, agricultural technology, livestock breeding, and the cultivation of food crops.

What is more, rather than introducing complicated methods and processes to

Africa, the Cubans brought reliable, easy-to-understand, robust technology, the use of which was comprehensible even to the uneducated populace. On the basis of their own experience, the internationalists – themselves inhabitants of a developing nation – had a better intuitive understanding of the population’s problems than did, for example, development workers from western nations or from the former East Bloc states.

As far as Cuban involvement in Angola is concerned, there are a number of indicators suggesting that this comprehensive commitment also had a stabilising function. This view was corroborated by the Belgian Foreign Minister at the time, Henri Simonet, after having paid a state visit to Angola in October 1978 – an opinion also shared, in fact, by several US academic researchers. Cuba’s support for one of the three competing Angolan liberation movements, the Marxist-Leninist oriented *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA), is largely to be traced back to a trip made to Africa by the former Cuban industry minister Ernesto “Che” Guevara in the year 1965. First instances of support given to African anti-colonial movements such as the Algerian *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) and to the independent nation of Algeria already occurred shortly after the revolution.

At the first conference of non-aligned states in 1961, Cuba had signalled its affinity to all countries of the “Third World”, and emphasised that progress could only be achieved for underdeveloped countries by means of an all-out attack on imperialist interests. Cuba’s political motives for its involvement in Africa were the struggle against colonial powers and imperialist interests with the goal of building up a world-wide anti-imperialist front – the notion of international solidarity among the countries of

the southern hemisphere in their struggle against the colonialism and imperialism of the North. The Cuban revolution was to become “internationalised”. International solidarity and proletarian internationalism were, in future, to be the cornerstones of Cuban foreign policy.

In the course of the 1960s and 1970s, Cuban troops, staff, and civilian auxiliary personnel were not only present in Algeria and Angola, but also in Ethiopia, Senegal, Mozambique, Tanzania, Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea-Conakry, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau. This solidarity discourse of “Internationalism” was decisively shaped by Guevara and his supporters during their Africa trip, and it served as a justification for dispatching Cuban civilian auxiliary helpers, instructors, and troops. The later success of Cuban troops in Angola, who not only repeatedly warded off the intervention of the South African army in 1975 and the ensuing years, but also helped the MPLA to victory against the rival UNITA and secured them long years in power, was an important milestone for Cuba’s role as the dominant power among the countries of the so-called Third World.

Cuba’s commitment to MPLA versus South African support for UNITA

In the West, Cuba’s commitment to the cause of the MPLA was viewed with severe mistrust and evaluated in terms of the dichotomies familiar from the Cold War period. The central issue was the role of Cuba as a supposed “accomplice” in Soviet foreign policy in Africa, even although it was already apparent in the 1980s that Cuba was pursuing a foreign policy which was quite independent of the USSR, and that its Africa missions were by no means always compatible with

Soviet global interests. This was also the case in Angola.

In the spring of 1975, the leader of the MPLA, Agostinho Neto, asked the Cuban government for financial and military support. It had become apparent that, on account of rivalry in the form of the UNITA (*União para a Independência Total de Angola*) and the FNLA (*Frente Nacional para a Libertação de Angola*), the MPLA would require to use military force in its battle for supremacy on Angola's independence day (11th November 1975).

Cuba was initially hesitant in responding to this request, and it was not until the end of July that the first Cuban staff arrived in Angola. Shortly before the agreed date for Angola's independence, when the South African army invaded Angola supported by the FNLA in order to prevent the assumption of power by a Marxist government, Cuba finally reacted by dispatching huge numbers of its special ministry of the interior troops. The Soviet Union supplied the necessary war material. With the help of the Cuban troops, who overpowered the South African intervention force and the FNLA close to the capital city Luanda, the MPLA was able to lead Angola to independence alone. Due to the presence of the Cubans, it also proved possible to successfully ward off a second offensive against the MPLA government in March 1976.

It was during this phase that the first contingent of Cuban doctors arrived in Angola. Initially they provided medical care primarily for the Cuban and Angolan armed forces, but in view of the health care crisis in the country – a majority of the non-urban Angolan population had never seen a doctor in their lives – the doctors very soon made a priority of treating the civilian population. After the end of the so-called “second war of liberation” in March 1976, even although the indepen-

dence of Angola under the political supremacy of the MPLA had initially been secured, there still remained a lack of qualified manpower and know-how in what was, in terms of mineral resources and raw material reserves, a rich country.

As a result of the hasty departure of a majority of the Portuguese population, Angola's industrial and agricultural production had gone into complete stagnation. More than 90% of the Angolan population were illiterate, and the majority of the people in Angola had no notion at all of what was involved in building up an independent nation.

In view of these facts, from May 1976 onwards the Cuban soldiers were urged to stay on in Angola, to lay aside their arms, and to contribute to the rebuilding of the country in their civilian professions. This was the starting point for systematic civilian action by Cubans in Angola. When Agostinho Neto, by then President of the independent People's Republic of Angola, paid an official state visit to Cuba at the end of July, he publicly praised Cuban involvement in his country. On his tour of the island with his state guest, Castro enlisted the support of further volunteers for this civilian support, and the two countries agreed on wider economical and technical co-operation.

From then on, the Cuban population was prepared for massive involvement at all levels in Angola. Castro provided a further political argument for action in Angola by comparing the victory over the troops of the South African apartheid regime with the crushing defeat of the US intervention at Playa Girón (the Bay of Pigs) in April 1961 – from that point onwards, Angola was to symbolise the “African Girón”.

This civilian mission became institutionalised on the part of Cuba in December 1976 with the creation of the *Consejo Estatal de Colaboración Económica*

(CECE), which from then on was to co-ordinate all technical internationalist missions abroad, as well as all overseas economic exchange programmes. The decision to dispatch civilian auxiliary personnel, however, remained the prerogative of those within the Cuban government responsible for the Angolan intervention. And the humanitarian objectives of the civilian mission in Angola should not be allowed to blur the fact that all operations took place in close co-ordination with the military leadership of the troops stationed in Angola.

The protracted nature of the civilian and, in particular, the military mission in Angola is primarily a consequence of the fact that, under the pretext of combating the Namibian liberation front SWAPO (*South West Africa's People's Organisation*), the South African army also undertook repeated incursions into Angolan territory. In the course of their actions, the South Africans supplied financial and military support to the UNITA under the leadership of Neto's most bitter rival, Jonas Savimbi. Thanks to this support – and to military support from the USA – the UNITA was able to consolidate its sphere of influence, especially in the rural areas of the south and the east. A further avowed goal of the UNITA was to drive the Cuban troops, armed and financially supported by the Soviet Union, out of Angola once and for all. In the understanding of the UNITA, the presence of Cuban troops in Angola constituted a foreign army of occupation. Accordingly, in the mid 1980s, Cuban civilians working in urban settlements also increasingly became targets for UNITA attacks. Thus, for example, 14 Cubans were killed in a bomb attack on a Cuban building workers' residence in the town of Huambo in April 1984. On the other hand, however, a military attack by the UNITA on the coastal town of Sumbe in March of the same year

also clearly demonstrated the flexible function of the Cuban civilian mission. The civilians successfully helped to defend Sumbe, since all Cubans embarking on active service in Angola were first required to complete a course of basic military training.

Cooperation in the educational sector

In 1977, the Angolan government embarked on a literacy campaign – a task with which the Cubans who, in 1961, had successfully taught one million of their population to read and write, were familiar enough. The language barrier between Spanish and the official Angolan national language Portuguese (which was spoken at least in the urban regions) was minimal, and the Cuban government decided to send contingents of several hundred student teachers to Angola as literacy workers, initially for a year each. Thus, in addition to Cuban medical aid, a second major cornerstone of civilian co-operation was created between Cuba and Angola.

However, there was a further dimension to the Cuban support in this area, inasmuch as Cuba also dispatched advisors to the Angolan ministry of education where teaching curricula, lesson contents and pedagogical concepts were drawn up based on Cuban models. The students of teaching were soon supplemented by Cuban teachers and university professors who, as a rule, absolved a one-to-two-year period of service, attempting to free the precarious Angolan educational system from its colonial past and to apply new teaching methods tried and tested in Cuba. The Angolan university system was largely rebuilt by Cuban university teaching staff in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the natural science and agricultural technology sectors.

A further important feature of the co-operation in the educational sector, initiated in 1976, was the education given to Angolan children and young adults in Cuban schools and universities. This scholarship programme, which was later to include the training and further education of adults as skilled labourers, technicians, engineers and doctors, was soon expanded upon, and a boarding school-cum-field centre created on the *Isla de la Juventud* where children and young adults from Africa, Asia and Latin America received training. Time and again, Cuba's political opponents pointed to this training of Angolan children in Cuba as evidence for the indoctrination of young Angolans in the ideology of the Cuban revolution.

In contrast to the Cuban soldiers, who were frequently stationed in sparsely populated areas, those Cubans doing civilian service, especially doctors and teachers, were in day-to-day contact with the Angolan population and thus had the opportunity to gain insights into Angolan culture and society.

However, whether or not this experience in fact led to the Cubans concerned sensing their historic and cultural bonds with the continent of Africa and its people, as propagated by the Cuban government, is questionable. There are a number of indicators suggesting that, for the majority of Cubans, the continent of Africa was the great unknown. Africa appears far more to have served as a projection surface for notions of "savagery", "poverty", and "backwardness" – an attitude which was fully on a par with European or western stereotypes concerning Africa. Even for Cubans of African descent, Castro's talk of a "Latin-African nation" and of "blood relationship bonds" binding Angola and Cuba tended to have a rather abstract significance. Only very few of them felt themselves familiar with Angola after

servicing there. The majority were glad to leave behind an often chaotic and dangerous warfare zone and to be able to return once more to the stable living conditions of their insular realm. Angola had become the negative counterpart of their own society. In view of their often traumatic experiences in Angola, they inevitably came to regard their own sphere of life and experience as a superior civilisation.

The experience of Cubans in Angola

It is important to bear in mind, when dealing with the experience of Cubans in Angola, that, even for the civilians, this was dominated by an increasingly brutal and unpredictable war, the omnipresence of which was to be felt, albeit indirectly, even in the urban areas. A good number of Cubans paid for their civilian service with their lives. Those Cubans who served not in Angola, but in other African countries not in a state of warfare, often express far more positive recollections of Africa. Apart from that, however, all of them were shocked at the extreme social inequality and the precarious living conditions they encountered among the majority of the population – slums, a lack of hygiene and medical care, life-threatening diseases, high infant mortality, food shortages, illiteracy, and widespread ignorance. Almost none of them had been prepared for such a situation.

It was not until later, when Cubans who had returned from Angola began to tell of their experience there, that any knowledge of the difficult living conditions in Angola began to spread among the Cuban population. Those who set out for Angola in the 1980s knew that an extreme and frequently mortally dangerous experience awaited them. The fact that there was one member in almost every Cuban fami-

ly with Angola experience meant that “Angola” came to be a collective experience within Cuban society. In the memories of many Cubans – given the years of economic crisis which hit their island starting in the early 1990s after the Angola mission was ended – Angola remains a difficult phase in their history.

Nevertheless, on account of their socialisation in revolutionary Cuba, most Cubans were fundamentally persuaded not only of the success of the internationalist concept, but also that what they themselves were doing was right. Yet despite that fact, each and every one of those who volunteered to serve in Angola also had their own individual motives. For the vast majority, the time spent in Angola was their first opportunity to leave the island of Cuba and to travel abroad. Curiosity and a powerful desire to get to know the world beyond their Caribbean island was but one of the major reasons. A further important factor was the fact that internationalist service overseas was (and still is) held in high regard within Cuban society, being rewarded with social prestige – and possibly even with improved career opportunities – on returning home to Cuba. The Cuban internationalists – no matter whether they were civilian or military personnel – had their place of work and continued payment of wages guaranteed, as well as receiving a small additional pay in Angola. A fair number entertained the hope that a stay abroad would also improve their material situation, for example by enabling them to purchase western consumer goods.

The question regarding the financing of the entire Angola mission remains unanswered to the present day. While the Cuban government still insists on the internationalist principle that it acted out of pure altruism, it has been repeatedly assumed that the Angolan side provided services in

return for the mission – something which would have been perfectly justifiable, given the great magnitude of the operation.

A further question yet to be explored is how the Angolan population reacted to the civilian support by the Cubans, and what form the concrete co-operation between Angolans and Cubans took. The Cuban presence in Angola was ended by the terms of the peace treaty signed in New York in December 1988 by South Africa, the MPLA government, and Cuba, and in which the independence of Namibia was agreed conditional to the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. The last Cubans returned home from Angola in mid-June 1991. Civilian auxiliary personnel from Cuba, now mostly recruited via international humanitarian organisations, were not deployed again in Angola until the end of the 1990s.

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Gilberto Calcagnotto

Brasil 2005: Crise política versus reforma política?

Neste pequeno artigo procura-se mostrar que, se por um lado a crise apresenta instituições investigativas em pleno funcionamento democrático, por outro a busca de uma reforma política feita às pressas – além de não encontrar respaldo na real vontade política dos parlamentares – não tem o apoio de cientistas políticos