

A brief moment of opportunity exists for southern Africa

by Jeffrey Steinberg

On April 1, more than 1,800 heavily armed guerrillas from the South West Africa People's Organization crossed the Angolan border into Namibia in open violation of the Dec. 22, 1988 Brazzaville Accords. Despite numerous eyewitness accounts, bolstered by satellite photographs that showed the buildup of the SWAPO forces along the border days in advance of the incursion, SWAPO's "foreign minister" issued an emphatic denial that any such invasion had occurred, claiming instead that the SWAPO forces were already inside Namibia before April 1, and were being subjected to slaughter by the South African Army in violation of U.N. Resolution 435.

In the past, world opinion would have rallied behind the SWAPO "big lie," the U.N. Security Council would have convened emergency sessions to impose new sanctions against the South African government in Pretoria, and the truth would never have come out about SWAPO's continued terrorist activities.

For a complex series of reasons, things went differently this time, and the SWAPO April 1 assault may prove to be the biggest political blunder ever made by SWAPO President Sam Nujoma. SWAPO's loss may furthermore prove to provide a brief, but significant, moment of opportunity for the entire southern African region to emerge from a decade of bloodshed and economic ruin and shift into a period of peace and prosperity.

Election process begins

April 1 marked Day One of the United Nations-sponsored independence process for Namibia. In an agreement worked out last December among Angola, Cuba, and South Africa, the holding of U.N.-supervised elections in Namibia on Nov. 1, 1989 was linked to a phased Cuban withdrawal of its 50,000 troops from Angola and the departure of all South African security forces from the former colony of South West Africa. Among the provisions of the so-called Brazzaville Accords was the withdrawal of all SWAPO armed guerrilla forces (as distinct from civilian SWAPO supporters) to bases 150 kilometers north of the Angolan-Namibian border.

Why, then, did SWAPO flagrantly violate the terms of the agreements which most international observers had anticipated would lead to a SWAPO government in Windhoek before year's end?

According to one well-placed Windhoek official, the answer in part lies in the fact that SWAPO will lose the Nov. 1 elections and will at best be a minority party within the new independent government. One key to this estimate is the vastly inflated U.N. figures on the number of Namibian refugees living in camps inside Angola. For years, the U.N. Refugee Relief Agency (UNRRA) had accepted as a matter of faith the claims by the Angolan government that nearly 80,000 Namibians have been living inside their country. The inflated head count enabled Angola to enjoy heavy annual UNRRA subsidies that helped finance their war against the pro-Western UNITA rebels seeking to drive the Soviets out of their country and constitute a truly independent regime in Luanda.

Now that the accords are in the implementation phase, the first step is the repatriation of all non-combatants back into Namibia where they are to participate in the November elections. Best estimates are that there never were more than 12,000 Namibians in Angola. The so-called SWAPO refugee vote will be much smaller than anyone outside the country realized.

A second factor prompting Windhoek officials to voice confidence that voters would reject the SWAPO slate, is the fact that the country has enjoyed a prolonged period of relative peace and economic stability. Ever since the regional security forces, heavily backed by South African regulars, waged a successful counterinsurgency campaign against SWAPO several years back, SWAPO activities have been largely limited to blind terrorist actions in and around Windhoek, the capital, and occasional cross-border actions from bases in Angola. The officials say that the population of Namibia in general has no great desire to change regimes at this point and install a now-discredited terrorist apparatus. The April 1 SWAPO assault has only served to further underscore that attitude.

As South West African officials have emphasized in recent weeks, SWAPO never had any intention of participating in genuine supervised elections. Their strategy was always to turn the U.N.-sponsored transition period into a time of chaos, expecting that the blame for the violence would be laid at the doorsteps of the Pretoria regime, and that SWAPO would be imposed in power by United Nations mandate, in a replay of the Carrington Plan of the early 1980s, which put

Anglo-Soviet Marxist puppet Robert Mugabe in power in Zimbabwe.

In Windhoek, some officials also believe that the timing of the SWAPO offensive may have also been linked to then ongoing talks in Havana between Fidel Castro and Mikhail Gorbachov. Castro reportedly was unhappy with the Soviet-mediated deal that ordered Cuban troops to pull out of their chief Africa enclave and flaunted Cuba's subservience to Moscow Central in matters of foreign policy. A SWAPO-induced blowup of the Brazzaville deal, bringing South African forces back into Namibia, would have provided the pretext for Castro to call off the troop pullout—even though evidence exists that Castro had devised a means of cheating on the accords that would have left a 10,000-man Cuban contingent in place in Angola even under the U.N. arrangement.

Ironically, the continuing "Gorbymania" among many Western governments may be one reason why the SWAPO claims of innocence fell on deaf ears for the first time ever.

At the point that the SWAPO forces made their cross-border incursion, the U.N. Transitional Assistance Group (UNTAG) overseeing the independence process was to have had 4,650 troops in place. Only 1,600 had arrived as of April 1. UNTAG therefore called upon the South African Army troops already confined to bases in the north of Namibia, as per the agreements, to come to the aid of the 500 security police forced to deal with the SWAPO invaders. In a week of heavy fighting between South African soldiers and SWAPO guerrillas, 140 SWAPO men and 21 police were killed.

Not only were the SWAPO forces routed. International reaction was nearly universal in its condemnation of SWAPO for violating the accords. South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha delivered an ultimatum to U.N. Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar: Bring SWAPO under control, or all deals are off. An emergency meeting involving Cuban, Angolan, South African, American, and United Nations officials occurred April 8-9 in Namibia, at which point additional pressure was put on SWAPO to withdraw its guerrillas back to the prescribed bases in Angola.

As of this writing, the accords are proceeding ahead, although SWAPO guerrillas have refused to report to checkpoints near the border from which they will be escorted back to their Angola bases by UNTAG observers.

Fate of UNITA is key

The precarious situation in Namibia and South Africa may hang or fall on the basis of what happens in Angola, now that the dry season is beginning and full-scale combat between the Marxist MPLA government and Dr. Jonas Savimbi's UNITA will commence over the next 60 days. UNITA's military presence in southern Angola is a key guarantor that SWAPO will not be able to continue its cross-border subversion, perhaps with greater support from Cuban, Angolan, and East German military forces.

According to one regional military expert, if Savimbi is

driven out of the border area, all hell will break loose across southern Africa by early next year at the latest. The key to Savimbi's survival now lies squarely with the Bush administration. With South Africa restricted by the Brazzaville Accords from providing overt military support to Savimbi, American Stinger missile shipments and other military aid are essential for UNITA's survival. In late January, President Bush had communicated to Savimbi that American support would continue unabated. A mid-April report of UNITA forces shooting down a Soviet cargo plane with a Stinger missile suggests that Bush is keeping his word. However, the MPLA regime in Luanda has clamped a near-total blackout on information about the fighting inside Angola, and South African Air Force shuttles into Jamba, Savimbi's headquarters, have been discontinued since April 1, meaning that Western journalists have been unable to obtain firsthand reports from the front.

Perfidious Albion?

After last month's British-Soviet-South African parleys in London regarding the fate of southern Africa, reports have come out of Pretoria that the financial group associated with Sir Harry Oppenheimer's Anglo-American Corp. and with Rio Tinto Zinc have been secretly negotiating with Sam Nujoma of SWAPO to impose a weak SWAPO government in Windhoek that would turn over looting rights to the London-centered group.

What has some analysts concerned is the fact that the Oppenheimer-Rio Tinto Zinc group has apparently gained significant added clout within South Africa's ruling Nationalist Party, as the result of the successful showdown with President Pietr Botha. Botha agreed early in April to step down from the presidency this summer for "health reasons" and allow Friedrich de Klerk, the party chairman, to take his place in early elections.

President Botha had been tentatively moving in the direction of reestablishing South Africa's role as the economic kingpin of the region, committed to a series of infrastructure projects that would have brought economic growth to the bordering countries. In such an arrangement, the newly "independent" Namibia would be a natural ally in a prosperity zone stretching into Angola and across to Mozambique and Malawi.

Even a defeat for the SWAPO insurgents, as Windhoek officials are predicting, without such a development perspective, would only postpone briefly the day of reckoning for southern Africa. If Pretoria goes the way of Sir Harry and Lonrho's Tiny Rowland, then the region will be turned into a looting ground.

And under such circumstances, Soviet generals will be slapping Gorbachov on the back for his adept playing of the "Pretoria card." For now, the situation is still very much open-ended. For the first time in a decade, events could take a turn for the better, and regional players may be in a position to determine their outcome.