The Soviets and Americans want to put an end to another of those interminable, unwinnable regional conflicts. The fighters—Angolans, Cubans and South Africans—agree that foreign troops must go. But Cuba is in no hurry: No timetable, no deal

A tug of peace in war-weary Angola

The superpowers have decreed there should be peace in Angola. Easier decreed than done. Unlike Afghanistan, where Moscow could inform a hapless client that Soviet troops were leaving, in Angola the Soviets and the Americans are merely interested paymasters; neither can command its partners in war to pack up or stop fighting. Last week in Geneva, those fighters asserted their autonomy by failing to agree on a timetable for the cease-fire and troop withdrawal they had endorsed in principle two weeks earlier.

Although the three parties—Angolans, Cubans and South Africans—will talk again, with an American as mediator and Soviets hovering in the corridors, the chances are slim that they will meet the superpower target, set at the Moscow summit, for a peace agreement by September 29. That date is symbolic, and inauspicious, as the 10th anniversary of a never implemented United Nations resolution calling on South Africa to move out of next-door Namibia after 70 years of occupation. Now, the prospect of Namibian independence has been revived as part of the Angola deal. But it will not come to pass unless South Africa gets its quid pro quo in the form of the departure of Cuba's 50,000 troops from Angola.

Battlefield standoff. The combatants have better reason to come to terms today than at any time during Angola's 13-year civil war. Even with Cuban stiffeners and 1,200 Soviet advisers, Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos's 80,000-man Army has lost ground against the 40,000 UNITA guerrillas led by Jonas Savimbi and equipped by the U.S. and South Africa. Savimbi has expanded his operations northward from bases in southeast Angola; today, he appears to control a quarter of the country.

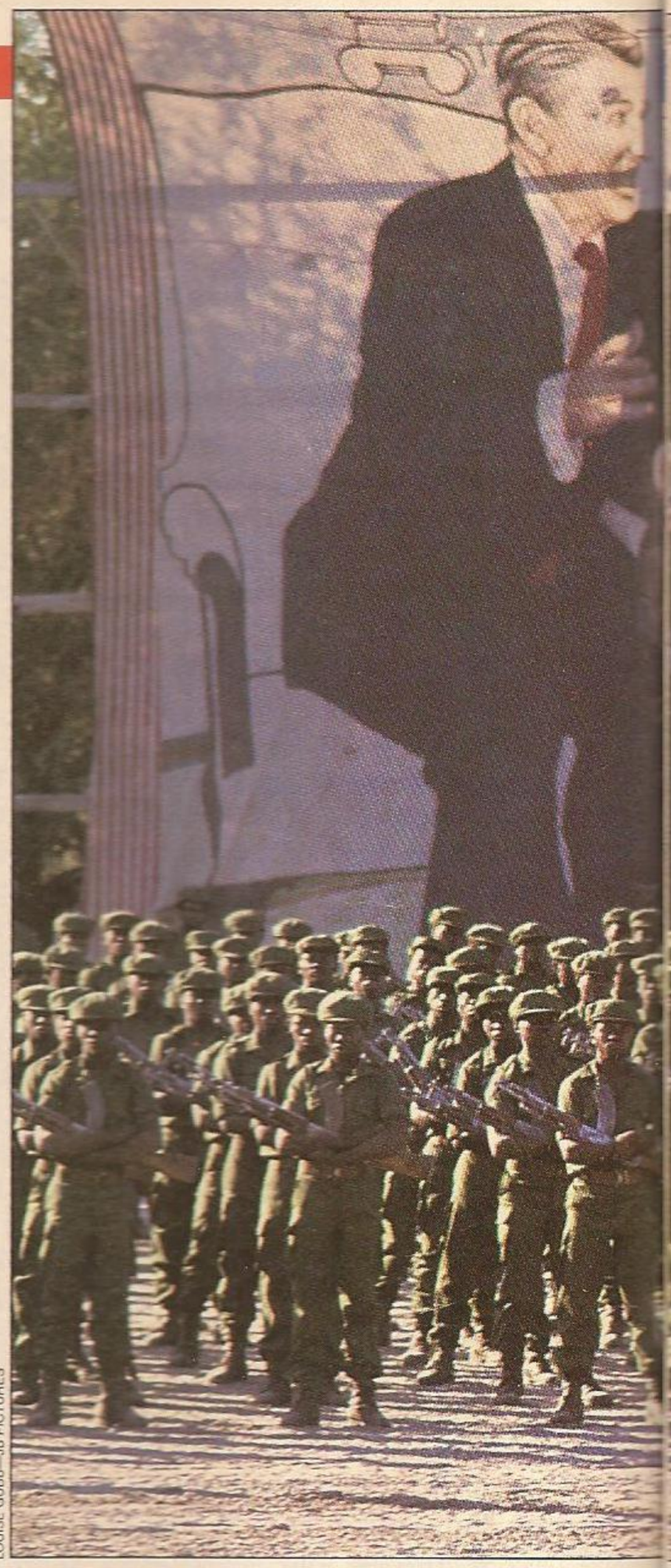
As a battleground for four armies, Angola has suffered such devastation that there will soon be little left to save. "After rebuilding one of the country's destroyed bridges eight times, our engineers gave up the exercise as hopeless," a Soviet expert told a visiting scholar. Nearly half a million Angolans have fled to neighboring countries. Of the 8 million left behind, half have been uprooted, more than 20,000 have lost limbs from mines and tens of thousands have been killed. Production of coffee, an economic mainstay, is down to 5 percent of prewar levels; over half the country's foreign-exchange earnings (including $1.3 billion worth of oil exports to the U.S.) goes to defense. A large part of this money—perhaps $1 billion a year—is used to pay for Soviet weapons. The U.S. provides $15 million a year covertly to UNITA, which gets five times as much from South Africa.

The cost to South Africa of supporting Savimbi and keeping a 3,000-to-5,000-man force in southern Angola plus 12,000 more men in Namibia is some $2 billion a year. Although South Africa is resource rich, it has a record national debt and international sanctions are biting. It can no longer afford the arms it needs to counter Luanda's Cuban-piloted MiG-23s, Soviet T-54 and T-55 tanks and an array of antiaircraft missiles.

The shape of the battle has changed in the past year. South Africans used to confine themselves to commando or bombing raids. But recently, as the Cubans have reinforced their troops, equipped them with advanced weapons and moved them farther to the south, the South Africans have had to engage in more-conventional combat and may already have lost their command of the air.

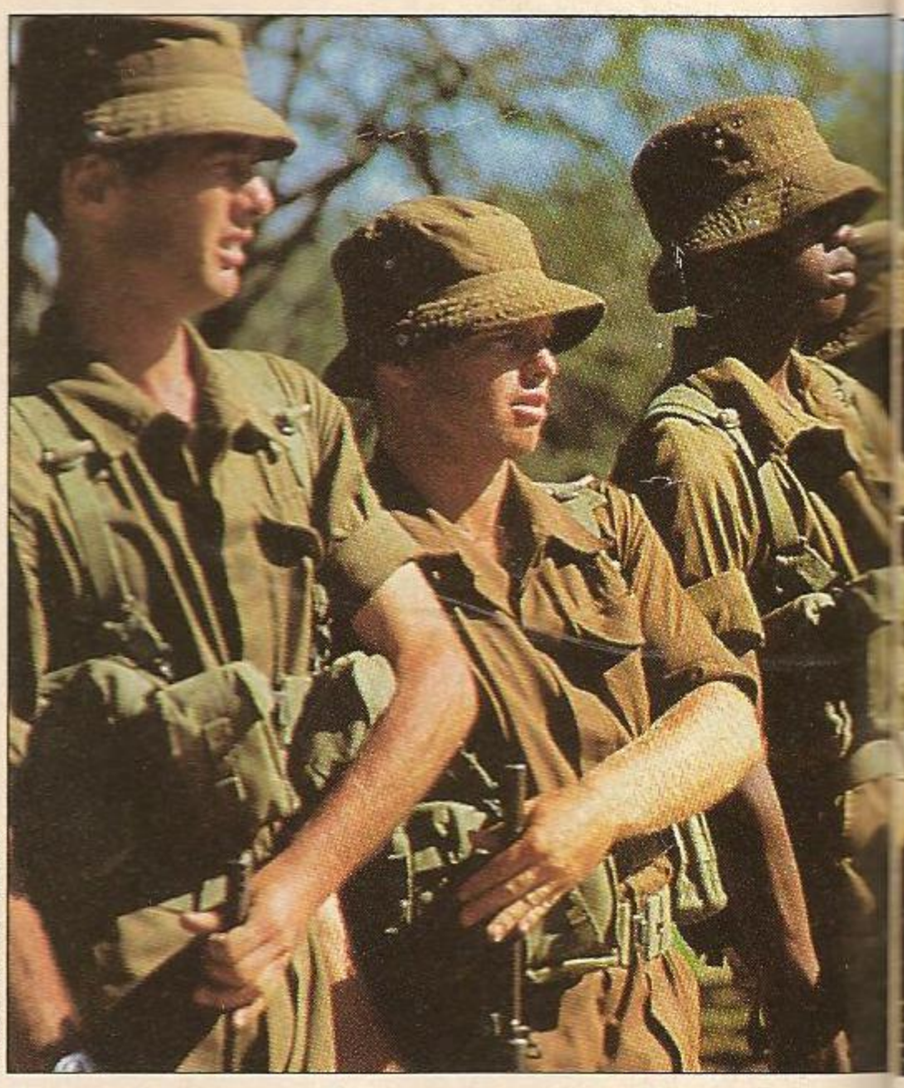
South Africa's death toll of 80 in Angola over the past year is insignificant compared with the other side's, but it is its highest so far in this war and extracts a political price at home. More and more South Africans are questioning the logic of expending lives and cash on defending a noncontiguous border in Angola when terrorist bombs are exploding almost daily in downtown Johannesburg and Cape Town. Last week, 143 young South Africans announced their refusal to serve in the defense forces; thousands more have left the country to escape the draft.

"In a country losing its youth, cut off from the world by sanctions and increasingly in debt, where the biggest growth



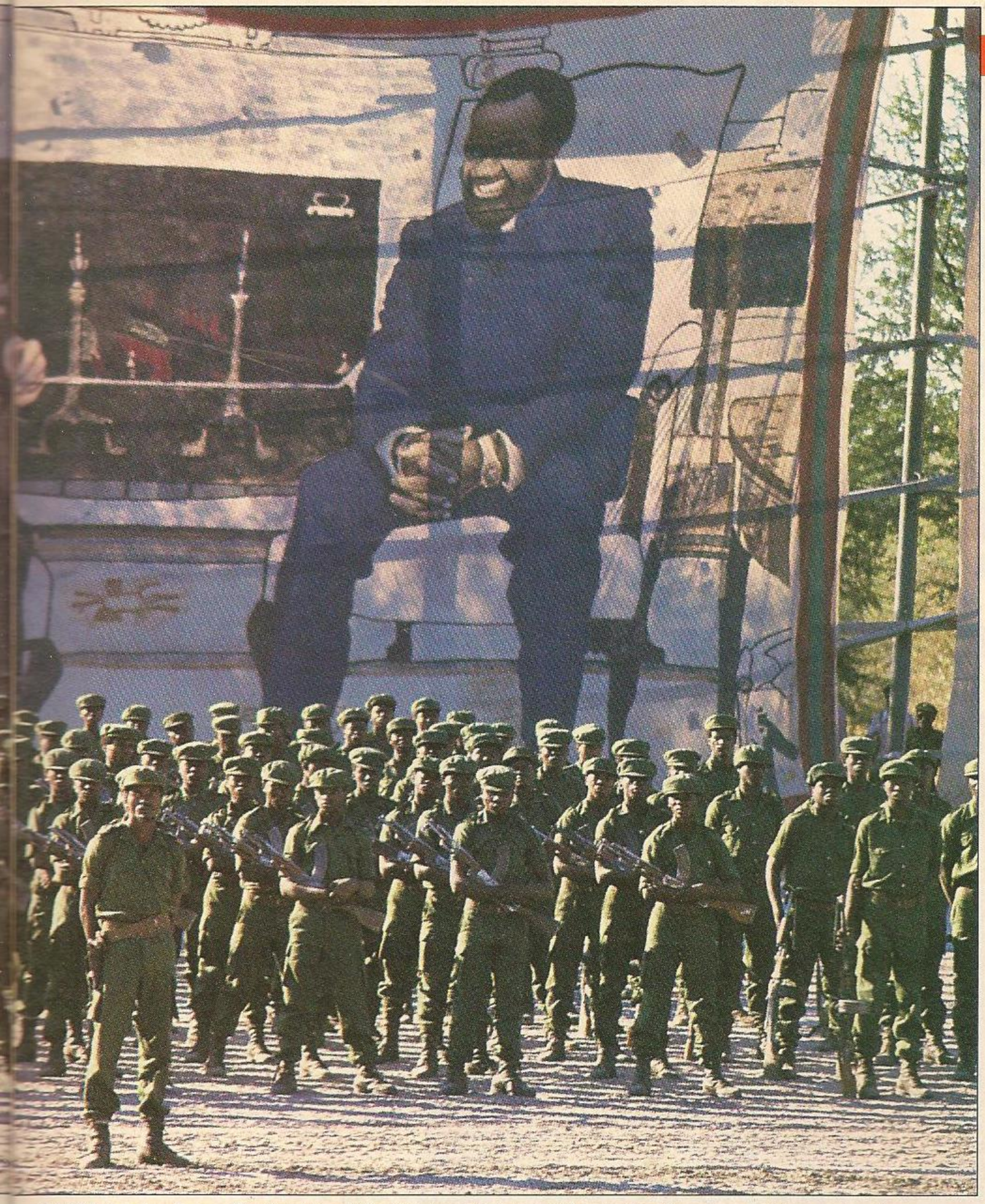
LOUISE GUBB—JB PICTURES

Angolan rebels at ease beside a potent totem:

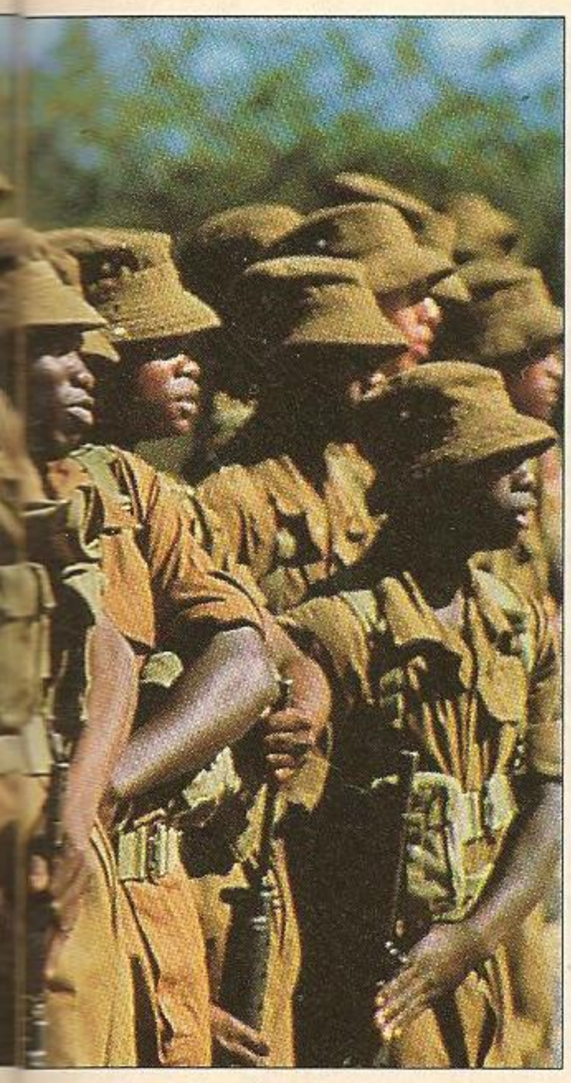


PATRICE HABANS—SYGMA

South African raiders in Namibia often strike



UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi in a Washington sitdown with another freedom fighter and patron



across the border

industry is security systems," notes a defense analyst, "Angola seems a distant threat." So does Namibia, a wasteland double the size of California with only a million people and depleted deposits of diamonds. South Africa went into Angola 13 years ago with the aim of stopping the red peril one country away. A secondary objective was to hit the Angolan bases of Namibia's independence movement, SWAPO, and the anti-apartheid fighters of the African National Congress. Defense experts now believe that South Africa can protect its northwest flank by reaching a security arrangement with SWAPO that would prevent guerrilla infiltration. Better to stop insurgency with simple means than fight Cubans equipped with sophisticated weapons, they reason.

South Africa will go. The Pretoria government has not fully accepted this logic. But last week, it committed itself publicly to a peace plan that would take South African forces out of Angola by September 1, and start the U.N.'s countdown to Namibian independence in October. Cuban forces would be out of Angola by June 1, when Namibia would hold a U.N.-supervised election.

Cuba and Angola immediately rejected the plan, in pique at Pretoria's violation of their news blackout. But their greater objection is to the deadline for the Cuban withdrawal. Cuba's counterproposal is for a speedy pullout by South Africa and a pullback to Angola's 13th parallel by its own troops; it would then gradually send the boys home over three years. Castro reiterated last week that he feels no obligation to heed Soviet advice on Angola. Cuba's own costs—between 1,000 and 4,000 deaths—seem to have provoked no irresistible pressures for an end to this extended foreign adventure.

But the timing of the withdrawals is key. For South Africa, a one-year deadline would leave Angola's inept Army vulnerable to being rolled over by UNITA or force its leaders to do a power-sharing deal with Savimbi. This is precisely why Cuba insists on more time. Although the peace principles call for a nonaggression pledge, Savimbi is not named at all and neither are the ANC and SWAPO. Like the mujeheddin in the Afghanistan agreement, they have been put in the "too hard" file. The negotiators and the superpowers on the sidelines will count their job done if dates certain are set for the departure of foreign forces. Then it will be up to Angolans, Namibians and South Africans to settle their own futures. Even if a peace deal should be struck, none of those futures looks bright. ■

by Hirsh Goodman in Johannesburg