

Castro explains why Angola lost battle against the SADF

By Simon Barber, dated 27 July 1989

According to the fashionable view, Pretoria agreed to withdraw from Angola and Namibia with its tail between its legs, a spent force. In other words, sanctions and Fidel Castro won the day. This is not the analysis that emerges from Castro's own version of events in his speech to the Cuban Council of State on July 9, when it met to confirm the death sentence imposed on General Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez, chief of the Cuban military mission in Angola from November 1987 to January this year.

Instead, it becomes clear that by late 1987 Castro had concluded that the MPLA regime was an irredeemable military and economic basket case, whipped in the field and four years behind in the trifling \$20m a year the Cubans claimed to be charging for their services. SA and Unita had effectively won. For Fidel, the only acceptable course was to stage a unilateral display of Cuban military prowess and go home.

So determined was Castro that nothing should embroil his army longer than was absolutely necessary that he virtually abandoned all other duties to run and finish the war from Havana. To ensure the MPLA would not prevaricate behind his back, he sought and obtained a Cuban seat at the negotiating table. And finally, last June, in the event SA tried to thwart his exit by challenging him on the battlefield, he gave orders that Oshakati was to be bombed and the Ruacana hydro-electric scheme destroyed.

The immediate purpose of the July 9 speech was to denigrate the role Ochoa played in the last, climactic year of the war by portraying him as lazy, incompetent, insubordinate and venal. To make this credible, Castro evidently felt it necessary to describe the defence of Cuito Cuanavale and Cuba's subsequent flanking offensive towards the Namibian border in unprecedented detail. He even quoted from cables he sent Ochoa and his field commander, General Leopoldo Cintra Frias...

This is the picture Castro painted. When General Ochoa reached Luanda in early November 1987, the Angolan army and its Soviet advisors were in headlong retreat following their rout at Mavinga.

As Castro put it: "The situation grew extraordinarily worse because of the increasing South African onslaught and the danger that the concentration of Angolan troops at Cuito Cuanavale would be annihilated."

On November 15, Cuba began landing the first of 15 000 reinforcements, including "our best pilots."

"Everybody was asking us to do something," Castro explained, adding with thinly veiled contempt for his allies: "We ourselves understood that even though we were in no way responsible for the errors that had led to that situation, we could not sit still and allow a military and political catastrophe to occur."

Meanwhile, there was panic and mutual recrimination at the joint Angolan-Cuban-Soviet operations centre in Luanda. "Many problems had to be solved."

In mid-December, word reached Havana that the joint command had agreed, allegedly with Ochoa's blessing but also in his absence, to what appeared to be a general retreat from Cuito Cuanavale and Menongue – the next town up the road to Huambo – north to the Benguela Line.

On January 2, 1988, Ochoa advised Havana that "the South Africans had withdrawn, there was no longer a crisis situation in Cuito and certain troop movements could be made."

Castro was not interested in regrouping to fight another day and flatly rejected this, signalling on January 12 that "as long as SA's intentions are not totally clarified" there must be no thought of moving forces north.

On January 13 the SADF and Unita launched an attack on the three Angolan brigades holding a defensive line to the east of Cuito Cuanavale and separated from the town by the Cuito River.

The Cubans – who at that point "did not have a single man in Cuito" – promptly ordered a "tactical group with a tank battalion, artillery and other weapons" to the front from Menongue.

Castro had made up his mind that the Angolans would make a stand at Cuito. By his own account, he told the MPLA that Cuba was taking charge. Castro peppered his generals with almost daily orders to pull back and shorten the defensive line – three Angolan brigades strung out over 15km, 18km east of the Cuito River - so that it could be covered by artillery positioned to the west.

The Angolans were hopelessly slow in complying. Ochoa was briefly recalled to Havana and told in no uncertain terms to "overcome any resistance from our Angolan allies in order to readjust the frontlines." To no avail.

On February 14, the South Africans did exactly as Castro feared, crashing through the 5km gap between the 21st and 59th brigades and encircling the latter. "A very difficult situation emerged. They could have gone as far as (the only bridge back into Cuito) and cut off three entire brigades" – more than 3 500 Angolan soldiers.

The Cubans counter-attacked with armour, losing seven tanks and 14 dead, by Castro's count. Far too many in his view and mitigated only by the fact that "the enemy had to use more than 100 vehicles." It gave the Angolan brigades time to retire towards the river. There they were effectively trapped, the South Africans having destroyed the bridge with "unmanned aircraft."

In the days that followed, Castro became increasingly animated, demanding to know how many tanks he had left on either side of the river and why the Angolans still failed to consolidate their lines.

On February 21, he cabled Ochoa in Luanda: "We have lost many days and cannot understand how our instructions, or simply our points of view, are conveyed to our people in Cuito. We do not know who the person responsible for receiving and implementing our instructions is... something is wrong with the line of communications for passing on our orders.

"The area commanders are not aware of the political, military and moral consequences that a disastrous confrontation with the forces to the east of the river could cause. These forces would not even have a few ships to do something comparable to what the British did with its fleet at Dunkirk."

With the arrival of General Cintra Frias, the defenders at last managed to get their act together, digging themselves in along the river protected by minefields in front and artillery and anti-aircraft cover from the rear to the west of the bridge. The South Africans launched several unsuccessful assaults but then sat back to bombard the town from a distance.

While the South Africans had not scored the strategic victory that might have been possible had they managed to cut off the Angolans before they regrouped, they had effectively run the Fapla to ground. The Angolans were no longer a factor in the war. On the other hand, the Cubans had secured their flank for the next move.

It was time for Castro's grand, solo stroke – the gesture that would save Cuban honour unhampered by Angolan incompetence, and the reason Castro had been so adamant Cuito should not fall.

On March 10, under Generals Cintra Frias and Miguel Lorente Leon, a newly reinforced Cuban main force was ordered south to the Namibian border from Lubango. "The most important of all strategical operations had begun."

By early June. The Cubans, having met virtually no resistance, had constructed a fortified airbase at Cahama, and were at work on a second at Xangongo. Advance units were at least as far south as Chipa, about 50km north of Calueque. Castro now believed – three weeks before the second round of tripartite negotiations in Cairo – "that the peace process had become irreversible."

His one major concern was that the South Africans would mess up his gesture by giving battle. He cabled Ochoa on June 7: "News of a possible South African surprise air attack...should not be underestimated...be ready to counter-attack with as many aircraft as possible to completely destroy the Ruacana water reservoirs and transformers...plans should also be prepared to hit Oshakati and nearby airbases...the Cahama group and everything that is available will have to be used for this...do not wait for orders to carry out the attack if there is a strong enemy attack against our troops."

These instructions were apparently given without prior consultation with the Angolan Government, which had reached a tacit understanding with Pretoria that the Ruacana complex was not to be touched.

Castro merely sent a telex to President Eduardo dos Santos informing him that he had ordered his generals "to place all forces on a state of maximum alert, to take all security measures and to have our aircraft ready to take off and repel the attack."

If he was less than candid with Dos Santos, Castro was equally determined that all other parties should be aware of his plans. "We notified the Soviets... we were warning everyone of the danger of the possibility that we might have to launch a strong attack in northern Namibia."

The South African air attack did not materialise. Instead, on July 26, South African long-range artillery bombarded Cuban units near Chipa. Castro decided that the shelling was not sufficient to merit a strike on Ruacana.

He cabled Ochoa: "The first step must be a strong air attack against the camp, military installations and South African personnel in Calueque and its environs...if the enemy's artillery can be located, strike it harshly."

Eleven South Africans died in the attack, the dam was hit and Pretoria "raised a big fuss." But the South Africans also "restrained themselves militarily" – just as Castro hoped they would.

He cabled again: "We have given them our initial response. Now it is up to them to decide what to do and if they should continue the escalation." Five weeks later all parties accepted the New York principles.

This was the climax of the war. From Calueque on the negotiators took charge. There were hiccups to be sure. Castro informed Ochoa as late as October 10 that an "impasse" had been reached and that there might have to be another demonstration.

But this, it seems, was designed less to frighten the South Africans than to sober up the Angolans, who were waiting for the outcome of the US presidential election before they finally committed to the tripartite agreement.

The Ruacana and Calueque dams would once again be the targets, but – as Castro told his commanders: "I do not think the South Africans want to resume the hostilities."

This is not the story of a South African defeat. It is the story of an Angolan defeat and how, with considerable nerve and panache, the Cubans extricated themselves from it.

When I visited the Museum of the Revolution in Havana last March, it struck me as odd that the exhibit commemorating the "glorious victory" at Cuito Cuanavale should have been secreted away from public view in a side corridor.

Now there seems to be an explanation. Fidel Castro had yet to decide who should be credited. The

general to whose genius the glory might logically have belonged was shot at dawn last Thursday.

Division General Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez, commander of the Cuban Expeditionary Force in Angola between November 1987 and January this year – the man, in other words, sent in to clean up the mess after Unita and the SADF had thrashed the MPLA and its Soviet advisers at Mavinga – was executed on charges, principally, of attempting to smuggle cocaine to the US in cahoots with Columbia's notorious Medellin cartel.

Or so at least the Cuban people and the world have been asked to believe. The transcripts of those sections of Ochoa's "trial" that were broadcast on Cuban television, and other evidence, suggest that the truth is rather different. The general may, tangentially, have been involved in the drug trade, but that was not the reason for his arrest and liquidation.

Ochoa, according to those who knew him (including diplomats involved in the Angola/Namibia settlement process), was a man of striking countenance and much intelligence and charisma.

He knew his mission was to preside over Cuba's last hurrah in Angola and that the "heroic" defence of Cuito was, therefore, a vainglorious fraud, designed to cover a retreat that had already been decided. The 15 000 new troops who followed Ochoa came to save Cuban face, not the MPLA.

Defence Minister Raul Castro, Fidel's brother, quoted the general as saying: "I have been sent to a lost war so that I will be blamed for the defeat." That was, indeed, his view.

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