M. Mandl

Operation Carlota

http://www.urrib2000.narod.ru/ArticCarlota-e.html

Gabriel García Márquez

1976

The United States first made known the presence of Cuban troops in Angola in an official statement of November 24, 1975. Three months later, during a short visit to Venezuela, ***Henry Kissinger*** remarked in private to President ***Carlos Andrés Pérez***: "Our intelligence services have grown so bad that we only found out that Cubans were being sent to Angola after they were already there." At that moment, there were many Cuban troops, military specialists and civilian technicians in Angola-more even than Kissinger imagined. Indeed, there were so many ships anchored in the Bay of Luanda that President ***Agostinho Neto***, counting them from his window, felt a very characteristic shudder of modesty. "It's not right," he said to a functionary personally close to him. "If they go on like that, the Cubans will ruin themselves."

It is unlikely that even the Cubans had foreseen that their solidarity aid to the Angolan people would reach such proportions. It had been clear to them right from the start, however, that the action had to be swift, decisive, and at all costs successful.

Contact was first established between the Cuban revolution and the MPLA [People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola] in August 1965, when Che Guevara was taking part in the guerrilla struggle in the Congo. Relations were subsequently strengthened, and in 1966 Neto himself,

accompanied by Hoji Ya Henda, the commander in chief of the MPLA who was later to die in the war, made a trip to Cuba where they met ***Fidel Castro***. Thereafter, owing to the conditions of the struggle in Angola, these contacts became sporadic again. Only in May 1975, when the Portuguese were preparing to withdraw from their African colonies, did the Cuban commander Flavio Bravo meet Neto in Brazzaville. The MPLA leader asked for assistance with the transport of an an-ns shipment and raised the possibility of wider forms of aid. These talks were followed three months later by a visit to Luanda of a Cuban delegation led by Commander ***Raúl Díaz Argiielles***, this time Neto made a more specific (but no more ambitious) request for a group of instructors to set up and run four military training centers.

- ***The Reactionary Assault***

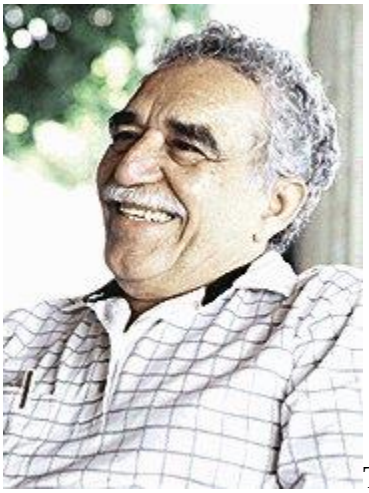
Even a superficial observer of the Angolan situation could have seen that ***Neto's*** request was a typical expression of his modesty. Although the MPLA, founded in 1956, was the oldest liberation movement in Angola, and although it alone possessed a broad popular base and a social, political and economic program suited to conditions in the country, nevertheless it found itself in a less favorable military position than the others. It had Soviet weapons, but not the personnel capable of handling them. By contrast, the well trained and equipped troops of the Zaire regular army, who first entered Angola on March 25, had proclaimed in Carmona a de facto government headed by ***Holden Roberto***-the brother-in-law of Mobutu and leader of the FNLA [Angolan National Liberation Front]-whose links with the CIA were public knowledge. To the west lay the Zambian-backed UNITA [National Union for the Total Independence of Angola] under the command of ***Jonas Savimbi***-an unprincipled adventurer who had collaborated continuously with the Portuguese army and the foreign exploiter companies. Lastly, South African regular troops had crossed into southern Angola from occupied Namibia on August 5, ostensibly to protect the dams of the Ruacana-Calueque hydroelectric complex.

All these forces, drawing on enormous economic and military means of support, were ready to draw an impenetrable ring around Luanda on the eve of November 11-the day when the Portuguese were due to abandon that huge, rich and beautiful territory where they had prospered for five centuries. Thus, when the Cubans received Neto's appeal, they did not limit themselves to strict fulfilment of its points: they decided to send at once a contingent of 480 specialists, who in the space of six months would set up four training centers and organize sixteen infantry battalions and twenty-five mortar batteries and antiaircraft machine-gun emplacements. These were supplemented with a team of doctors, 115 vehicles and a suitable commurucations network.

This initial contingent traveled out in three improvised ships. The only passenger vessel, El Vietnam Herolco, had been bought by the dictator ***Fulgencio Batista*** in 1956 from a Dutch company and converted into a training ship. The other two- Coral Island and La Plata-were

hastily modified merchant ships; the way in which they were loaded illustrates extremely well the foresight and boldness with which the Cubans faced up to the predicament of Angola.

It may seem strange that the Cubans took their own motor fuel with them. For Angola is a petrol-producing country, whereas Cuba's main source of supply is halfway across the world in the Soviet Union. However, the Cubans preferred to take no chances and loaded 1, 000 tons of petrol on the first three ships. The Vietnam Heroico carried 200 tons in 55-gallon tanks, safling with the holds open so that the gases could escape; La Plata actually carried petrol on the deck. The night they finished loading the cargo coincided with a Cuban popular fiesta: rockets burst in the sky above Havana harbor, where a stray spark would have reduced those three floating arsenals to ashes. Fidel Castro himself came to see them off -as he was to do with every contingent that left for Angola-and after inspecting their traveling conditions, he let slip a sentence that was all the more his own for its apparently casual character: "At any rate", he said, "you'll be more comfortable than on the Granma.



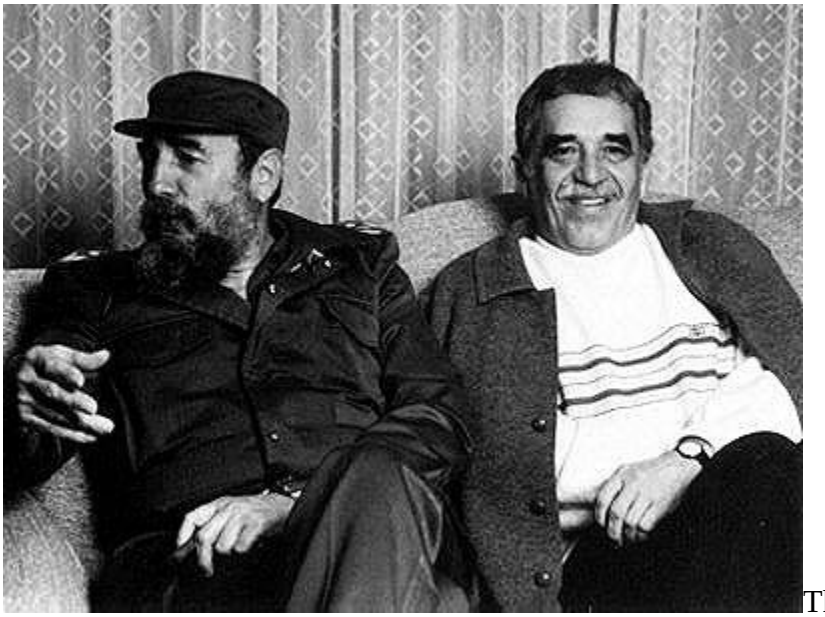
There was no guarantee that the Portuguese soldiers would allow the Cuban instructors to land. On July 26, after the MPLA's first request for aid had already been received, Castro asked Colonel Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho, who was then in Havana, to obtain the Portuguese govemment's authorization for the dispatch of Cuban supplies to Angola. Carvalho promised to arrange it, but no further reply ever arrived. Nonetheless, The Vietnam Heroico put in to Puerto Amboim at 6.30 am on October 4, and Coral Island arrived at Punta Negra on October 7, followed four days later by La Plata. No one had given pemiission for them to come. But nor had anyone opposed it.

The Cuban instructors were received as planned by the MPLA and immediately opened up the four training schools. One of these was 300 kilometers east of Luanda at N'Dalatando (called Salazar of Benguela; the by the Portuguese); another at the Atlantic port of Benguela, the third at Saurimo (fom-ierly Enrique de Carvalho) in the remote and desolate eastern province of Lunda, where the Portuguese had destroyed a military base before withdrawing; and the fourth in the Cabinda enclave. By that time Holden Roberto's troops were so close to Luanda that a Cuban artillery instructor at N'Dalatando, who was giving his students one of their first lessons, could actually see the mercenaries'an-nored cars advancing. On October 23, a mechanized brigade of the South African regular army entered the country from Namibia and, within three days, had occupied the towns of Sada Bandeira and Mocamedes without meeting any resistance. It was like a Sunday drive: the South Africans played festive music on cassette decks fitted to their tanks. In

the north, the leader of a mercenary column conducted operations from a Honda sports car, seated beside a blonde film actress. The column moved forward with a holiday air, neglecting to send out advance patrols, and it could not even have realized where the rocket came from that blew the car to pieces. AB that was found in the woman's bag was an evening dress, a bikini and an invitation card to the victory celebrations in Luanda that Holden Roberto had already prepared.

By the end of that week, the South Africans had penetrated Angola to a depth of more than 600 kilometers and were advancing on Luanda at some 70 kilometers a day. On November 3, they attacked the sparsely occupied Benguela training centre for new recruits. So the Cuban instructors had to abandon classes and face up to the invaders with their trainee soldiers, to whom they gave instruction between battles. Even the doctors revived their military skills and went off to the trenches. The MPLA leaders, who had been prepared for a guerrilla struggle rather than a full-scale war, then understood that only an urgent appeal for international solidarity would enable them to rout this concerted attack by neighboring states, supported by the most rapacious and destructive resources of imperialism.

- ***Cuban Internationalism***



The spirit of internationalism is a traditional quality of the Cubans. Although the revolution strengthened and defined it in accordance with the principles of Marxism, the essence of this spirit was already well established in the actions and writings of José Martí. This fighting commitment has been evident in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Thus even before the Cuban revolution declared its socialist character, it was giving such considerable aid to the Algerian FLN [National Liberation Front] in its war against French colonialism that the ***De Gaulle*** government retaliated by banning ***Cubana*** flights over France. Later, at a time when Cuba was itself devastated by Hurricane Flora, a battalion of Cuban internationalist fighters was sent to defend Algeria against Morocco. In fact, no contemporary African liberation movement has been denied Cuban solidarity, whether expressed in material and arms or in the training of military mid civil technicians and specialists.

Mozambique (since 1963), Guinea-Bissau (since 1965), Cameroun and Sierra Leone have all at one time or another requested and received forms of solidarity aid. The president of the Republic of Guinea, ***Sekou Touré***, repulsed a mercenary landing with the assistance of a Cuban unit. Commander Pedro Rodriguez Peralta, now a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba, was captured by the- Portuguese in Guinea-Bissau and imprisoned for several years. When Agostinho Neto called on Angolan students in Portugal to go to study in the socialist countries, many were received by Cuba; today they are all engaged in the construction of socialism in Angola-some of them in prominent positions. One example is N'Binda, an economist, currently the Angolan minister of finance. Others are the geologist Enrique dos Santos, who maed a Cuban and is now a member of the MPLA Central Conunittee; Mantos, an agronomist and present head of the Military Academy; and N'Dalu, who in his student days distinguished himself as Cuba's leading footbalter and who is now second-in-command of the Angolan First Brigade.

However, nothing illustrates the duration and intensity of the Cuban presence in Africa better than the fact that Che Guevara himself, at the prime of his life and the height of his fame, went off to fight in the guerrilla war in the Congo. He left Cuba on April 25, 1965-the very same day on which he subn-Atted his farewell letter to Fidel Castro, giving up his rank of commander and everything else that legally tied him to the government. He traveled out alone on commercial airlines, under cover of an assumed name and an appearance only slightly altered by two expert touches. His executive case contained works of literature and numerous inhalers to relieve his insatiable asthma; he would while away the dull hours in hotel rooms playing endless games of chess with himself. Three months later, he met up in the Congo with 200 Cuban troops who had traveled from Havana in a ship loaded with arms. The precise object of Che's mission was to train guerrillas for the National Council of the Revolution, which was fighting against ***Moise Tshombe***-that puppet of the former Belgian colonialists and the international mining companies. Patrice Lumumba had been murdered, and although the titular head of the National Council of the Revolution was Gaston Soumahot, the person really in command of operations was ***Laurent Cavila***, based at his Kigona hideout on the opposite shore of Lake Tanganyika. This situation undoubtedly helped Che Guevara to keep his real identity secret, and for even greater security he did not appear as the principal leader of the mission. That is why he was known by the ahas Tatu, which is the Swahili word for the nwnber two.

Che Guevara remained in the Congo from April to December 1965, not only training guerrillas but leading them into battle and fighting by their side. His personal links with Fidel Castro, which have been the subject of so much speculation, did not weaken at any moment: the two maintained permanent and friendly contact by means of an excellent communications system.

After Tshombe was overthrown, the Congolese asked the Cubans to withdraw in order to facilitate the conclusion of an armistice. Che left as he had come: without a sound. He took a regular flight to Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania, keeping his head buried 'in a book of chess problems which he read and re-read throughout the six-hour journey. In the next seat, his Cuban adjutant tried to fend off the political comn-tissar of the Zanzibar army- an old admirer of Che who spoke of him incessantly all the way to Dar-es-Salaam, trying to obtain news of him and reiteratings desire to meet him again.

In that fleeting, anonymous passage through Africa, Che Guevara was to sow a seed that no one will destroy. Some of this men went on to Brazzaville, to train guerrilla units for the PAIGC [African Party of the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verdel (then led by ***Amilcar Cabral***) and especially for the MPLA. One of these columns later entered Angola in secret and, under the name "Camilo Cienfuegos Column", joined the struggle against the Portuguese. Another infiltrated into Cabinda and later crossed the river Congo to implant itself in the Jembo region-the birthplace of Agostinho Neto, where the fight against the Portuguese had been going on for five centuries. Thus the recent Cuban aid to Angola resulted not from a passing impulse, but from the consistent policy of the Cuban revolution towards Africa. This time, however, there was a new and dramatic element involved in the delicate Cuban decision. It was no longer a question simply of sending help, but of embarking upon a large-scale regular war, over 10,000 kilometers away, at an incalculable economic and human cost and with many unpredictable political consequences.

- ***The American Dilemma***

The possibility that the United States would intervene openly, Tinstead of through mercenaries and South Africa as it had done until then, was undoubtedly one of the most disturbing unknowns. However, a rapid analysis of the following factors suggested that Washington would at least think several times before going ahead. The United States was just emerging from the Vietnam debacle and the Watergate scandal with a president whom no one had elected. The CIA was a prisoner of Congress and stood deeply compromised in the eyes of public opinion. The government had to avoid appearing as the ally of racist South Africa in front of both the majority of African countries and the black population of the Uiited States itself. Finally, the country was then in the throes of the presidential election campaign and the feverish bicentenary celebrations. Moreover, the Cubans could safely rely on the solidarity and material aid of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, even though they were also aware of the possible implications of the operation for the policy of peaceful coexistence and international detente. The problems involved in this irreversible decision were clearly too great and complex to be resolved in twenty-four hours. Nevertheless, just twenty-four hours later on November 5, at a large and calm meeting, the leadership of the Commulu'st Party of Cuba reached its decision without wavering. Contrary to numerous assertions, it was a sovereign and independent act by Cuba; the Soviet Union was informed not before, but after the decision had been made. On another such November 5, in 1843, a slave called Black Carlota, working on the Triunvirato plantation in the Matanzas region, had taken up her machete at the head of a slave rebellion in which she lost her life. It was in homage to her that the solidarity action in Angola bore her name: Operation Carlota.

Operation Carlota began with the dispatch over a period of thirteen days of a 650-man battalion, strengthened by special troops. Thev were transported to Luanda airport itself, then still occupied by the Portuguese, in successive flights from the military section of Havana José Martí airport. Their brief was to halt the drive of the enemy forces against the Angolan capital until the Portuguese withdrew, and then to support the resistance while awaiting reinforcement by sea. But the men who left on the first two flights were convinced that they were already too late, and their sole remaining hope was to save Cabinda.

 The first contingent left at 4 pm on November 7, on a special Cubana Airlines flight, attended by two regular stewardesses; the plane was one of the legendary ***Bristol Britannia turboprop BB 218*s** which have been discontinued by their British manufacturers and pensioned off throughout the world. The passengers remember clearly being a total of eightv-two, since there were the same number on board the Granma. Dressed in holiday clothing with no military insignia, and carrying briefcases with their own ordinary passports, they had the look of healthy tourists roasted by the Caribbean sun. The members of the special-forces battalion, who come under the Ministry of the Interior rather than the Revolutionary Armed Forces, are skilled fighters with a high ideological and political level; some have academic degrees, read a great deal and are constantly concerned with intellectual excellence. Thus their cover of civilian hohday-makers must have come as no surprise to them. But inside their cases were machine-guns; and the cargo hold of the aircraft was filled not with holiday gear but with a large load of light artillery, personal firearms, three 75mm guns and three 82mm mortars. The only modification to the plane was a floor hatch that enabled the weapons to be removed via the passenger cabin in case of emergency.

The first stop to take on fuel was made in Barbados, in the middle of a tropical storm; the main purpose of the next (five hour) stop in Guinea-Bissau was to await nightfall before flying on secretly to Brazzaville. The Cubans made use of this time to sleep-the most terrible sleep they had ever had, since there were so many mosquitoes in the airport sheds that the bed-sheets were soaked with blood.

Mobutu, with his proverb ial arrogance, has said that Brazzaville is illuminated by the glow of Kinshasa-the modern brightly lit capital of Zaire. And he is right about that. The two cities are situated opposite each other on the river Congo, and their airports are so close that the first Cuban pilots had to take great care not to land on an enemy runway. They managed to do this without mishap, and, their lights extinguished to avoid observation from the other bank, remained in Brazzaville just long enough to listen to radio reports on the situation in Angola. Angolan commander Xieto, who kept on good terms with the Portuguese commissioner, had obtained his permission for the Cubans to land. And that is what they did, at lopm on November 8 under a torrential downpour and with no guidance from the control tower. Fifteen minutes later, when the second plane arrived, three ships were just leaving Cuba loaded with an artillery regiment, a battalion of motorized troops, and a number of rocket-launcher crews; they began to unload in Angola on November 27. On the enemy side, Holden Roberto's columns were so close that a few hours earlier they had killed an old woman' a bombardment aimed at the Cuban in

concentration at Gran Farn' barracks. There was no time for rest. The soldiers changed into olive-green uniform, joined the ranks of the MPLA, and went off to battle.

For security reasons, the Cuban press had not divulged the mission to Angola. But as usually happens in Cuba with such delicate mflitarv matters, the operation was a secret jealously guarded by eig'ht million people. The First Congress of the Cormmunist Party-the center of a kind of national obsession throughout the year and now due to be held in a few weeks' time -began to take on a new dimension.

- ***Volunteers***

The first stage of the procedure for fomiing volunteer units was the personal communication to members of the front-he reserve, which comprises all males between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five, and to former members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces. They were summoned by telegram to their appropriate military committee. Although no reason was given, it was so evident that anyone who thought he had the military capability rushed to his local committee without waiting for a telegram to arrive. A great deal of effort was required to prevent the conversion of this massive solicitude into a state of national disorder.

The selection criteria were as strict as the urgency of the situation allowed: not only military qualifications and physical and moral attributes, but also work record and political formation were taken into account by the committees. But despite this rigor, there were numerous cases where volunteers managed to slip through the selection filters.

There was the qualified engineer, for example, who passed himself off as a truck driver; or the high official who successfully posed as a mechanic; or the woman who was very nearly accepted as a private soldier. One boy left without his father's permission, only to meet him later in Angola, since he too had gone without telling his family. In contrast, one twenty-year-old sergeant could in no way gain the necessary authorization, and had to put up with an affront to his machismo when his journalist mother and doctor fianc6e were sent out. A number of common prisoners begged to be selected, but none of them was even considered.

The first woman to leave had been turned down several times on the grounds that "it is much harder there for a woman." At the beginning of December she was preparing to stow away, and with the help of a photographer comrade had already stored her clothes in the hold, when she learned that she had been chosen to go legally by plane. Her name is Esther Lidia Díaz Rodríquez-a twenty-three-year-old former school teacher who joined the Revolutionary An-ned Forces in 1969 and distinguished herself in shooting. She went with three of her brothers: César, Rubén and Erineldo. All four went on their own initiative, and, without consulting each other, told the same story to their mother-that they were taking part in army maneuvers at Camaguey in comection with the party congress. They all returned safe and sound, and although their mother was proud that they had gone to Angola, she did not forgive them for lying about the Camaguey maneuvers.

Conversations with those who returned show that some Cubans had peculiar motives of their own for wishing to go to Angola. At least one had no other aim than to defect, and he later hijacked a Portuguese aeroplane to Lisbon, where he applied for asylum. No one was forced to go: indeed, before leaving, each person had to sign a statement that he was a volunteer. Some refused to go and were exposed to all kinds of public scom and private contempt. But there can be no doubt that the immense majority left for Angola filled with the conviction that they were perfomiing an act of political solidarity, and with the same consciousness and bravery that marked the rout of the Bay of Pigs invasion fifteen years earlier. That is why Operation Carlota was not a simple expedition by professional soldiers, but a genuine people's war.

- ***The Logistic Achievement***

For nine months the mobilization of human and material Fresources constituted an epic feat of audacity. The decrepit ***Britannias***, patched up with ***Ilyushin 18*** brakes, kept up a constant and almost unbelievable flow. Although their maximum load is normally 185,000 pounds, they often broke all records by flying with 194,000. The pilots, who are usually restricted to seventy-five flying hours a month, logged up more than 200. As a rule, each of the three Britannias in service carried two full crews, who would change over in mid-ffight. But one pilot remembers being on duty for the whole of a fifty-hour round trip, forty-three hours of which were spent in the air. "There are moments, " he said, with no claim to heroism, "when you cannot possibly get more tired than you already are. " Owing to their exhaustion and the constant time changes, the pilots and stewardesses lost all sense of time, orientating themselves solely by their boiry needs: they ate only when they were hungry, and slept only when they felt sleepy.

Bristol Britannia BB-318 Cubana CU-T671, in Shannon, Ireland, on June, 1975

The route from Havana to Luanda is a desolate one, and in today's jet age it is impossible to obtain wind reports relating to the Britannia's cruising altitude of 18-20,000 feet. With no idea of the conditions awaiting them on arrival, the Cuban pilots would follow unknown flight paths, keeping to illegal heights in order to save fuel. On the most dangerous stretch between Brazzaville and Luanda, there was no airport at which to make an emergency landing. Moreover, the soldiers traveled with loaded guns, and, in order to lighten the load, explosives were removed from their cases and missiles from their protective sheaths.

The United States hit at the ***Britannia's*** weakest point: its short range. When Washington secured a Barbados government ban on refuelling stops, the Cubans established a route across the Atlantic from Holguin, in the far east of Cuba, to the Isla da Sal in the Cape Verde islands. They were like trapeze artists without a safety net, for on the outward journey the planes arrived with barely enough fuel left for two hours in the air, whflst on the return flight, owing to adverse winds, they ended up with only one hour's reserves. However, even that route had to be discontinued, in order not to expose the defenseless Cape Verde islands to danger. Thereafter,

four extra petrol tanks were fitted to the aircraft cabin, which made e-albeit with it possible to fly nonstop from Holguin to Brazzavifl

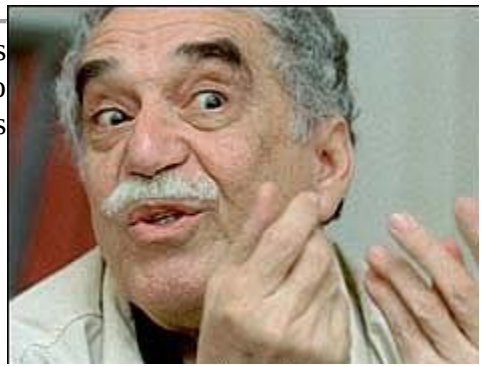
thirty fewer passengers. The other solution of making a stop in Guyana did not prove practicable, both because the runway was too short and because Texaco (the company which exploits Guyana's petroleum resources) refused to sell fuel. The Cubans tried to get round this bv sending a shipload of petrol to Guyana, but through some myst'erious accident it became contaminated in misterious circumstances with earth and water. Despite all these acute difficulties, the Guyana government stood firm in solidarity with the Cubans until the U.S. ambassador personally threatened to bombard and destroy Georgetown airport. The aircraft were serviced in half the normal time, and one pilot remembers flying on several occasions without radar; no one can recall, however, an actual instrument failure. It was in these indescribable conditions that ***101 flights*** were made during the course of the war.

Transport by sea was no less dramatic. In the only two passenger ships, each of 4,000 tons, all the free space was converted into sleeping accommodation and latrines were improvised in the nightclub, bars and corridors. For a number of journeys, the normal capacity of 226 passengers was tripled. Even cargo ships, which carried a crew of eighty, managed to transport over a thousand passengers as well as arms, explosives and armored cars. Field kitchens had to be put together in the lounges and cargo holds, and, in order to save water, disposable plates and yogurt containers were used for eating and drinking. Washing was done in ballast tanks and some fifty latrines emptying over the side were assembled on deck. Towards the end of six months of exceptional performance, the tired machinery of the oldest ships began to break down. This was the only ground of exasperation for the first repatriated soldiers, whose anxious return was delayed for several days by a blockage of Vietnam Heroico's filters. When the other ships in the convoy were forced to wait for it, some of their passengers understood Che Guevara's statement that the rate -of advance of a guerrilla group is determined by the man who marches the slowest. At the time, these obstacles were all the more worrying since the Cuban ships were subjected to all kinds of provocation by U.S. destroyers, witch followed them for days on end, and by warplanes that menacingly buzzed and photographed them.

No serious sanitary problems arose in spite of the harsh conditions of a voyage that lasted about twenty days. In the total of forty-two trips made during the six months of war, the medical services on board had to face up to only two operations-one for apendicitis and one for hernia - and to a single outbreak of diarrhea caused by a tin of meat. More difficult to contain was the epidemic that affected members of the crew: they wanted at any price to stay and fight in Angola. One of them-a junior officer in the reserves-found a way to obtain an ofive-green uniform, mingled with the disembarking troops, and stayed on undetected. He became one of those fine intelligence officers who so excelled during the war.

- ***Defeat Threatens***

The arrival of Soviet material aid by various channels necessitated a constant supply of skilled personnel able to handle and give instruction in the handling of new weapons



and complex equipment that were as yet unknown to the Angolans. At the end of November, the Cuban chief of staff went in person to Angola. It then seemed justifiable to do everything possible to avoid defeat.

But the truth is that loss of war was imniinent at that point. In the first week of December, the situation was so desperate that serious consideration was given to the possibility of holding up in the Cabinda enclave and evacuation from a secure beachhead near Luanda. The finishing touch was the fact that this perspective of retreat was opening up at the worst conceivable moment for both the Cubans and the Angolans. The former were preparing for the first party congress-due to be held between December 17 and 24-and the Cuban leaders realized that a military reverse in Angola would be a mortal political blow. The Angolans had wanted to attend the impending OAU [Organization of African Unity] conference with a more favorable military position, in order to win the support of a majority of African countries.

The adversities of December were due, in the first place, to the enemy's formidable firepower, who, by that date, had already received more than $50 million in military aid from the United States. In the second place, it was due to the delay with which Angola had asked for Cuban aid, and the inevitably slow arrival of supplies. And finally, it was due to the conditions of 'sery and cultural backwardness bequeathed to Angola by half a nalennium of soulless colonialism. It was this last condition that created the greatest obstacles to the decisive integration of the Cuban fighters with the armed population of Angola.

After all, the Cubans were used to the same climate, vegetation and apocalyptic downpours and the same clamorous nightfall, heavy with the odor of molasses and alligators. Some were so similar to Angolans that the playful story soon spread that the only way of distinguishing between them was to feel the tip of the nose: the Africans have a flabby cartilage, as a result of being carried flat against their mothers' backs as babies.

The Portuguese settlers were perhaps the most voracious and niggardly in history. They constructed beautiful towns, of buildings with refrigerated windows and shops adorned with huge neon signs. However, these were towns for whites like the ones being built by Yankees around the old Havana which the peasants looked upon with awe when they first came down from the Sierra, their rifles slung across their shoulders. Beneath that shell of civilization lay a huge, teeming land of misery. The living standard of the native population was one of the lowest in the world, the flhteracy rate higher than 90 percent, and the cultural conditions closer to the Stone Age than the twentieth century. Furthermore, in the towns of the interior, only the men spoke Portuguese, and thev lived with as many as seven wives in the same house. Age-old superstitions were a hindrance not only in everyday life but also in the conduct of the war. Many Angolans continued to be convinced that buflets could not pierce white skins; they had a superstitious dread of planes; and they refused to fight in trenches, saying that tombs are ordy for the dead. In the Congo, Che Guevara had already seen fighters put on necklaces against guns or bracelets against grapeshot, and bum smudges on their face to protect them from the hazards of battle. He became so interested in these cultural anachronisms that, in an attempt to change them from within, he made a detailed study of the peculiarities of tribal culture and learned to speak Swahili. He thus came to realize how deeprooted in men's hearts is that pernicious force which cannot be vanquished by bullets: colonization of the mind.

Sanitary conditions were, of course, appalling. In Sao Pedro da Cota the Cubans almost had to use force to treat a young boy who had covered his body with boiling water and whose family had left his flesh raw in the belief that nothing could be done to save him. The Cuban doctors came across diseases of which they had not even heard. Under Portuguese rule, there had been a mere ninety doctors to a population of six million, and most of those were concentrated in the capital. When the Portuguese left, only thirty doctors remained in the whole country. On the very day he arrived at Puerto Amboim, a pediatrician watched five children die without being able to do anything for lack of resources. That was an unbearable experience for a thirty-five-year-old doctor who had been trained in a country with one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the world.

- ***The Cultural Front***

During the long, silent years of struggle against Portuguese Ddomination, the MPLA made considerable headway against primitivism, thus creating the conditions for final victory. In the liberated areas, they raised the political and cultural level of the population, combated tribalism and racism, and promoted free education and public health services. The seeds of a new society were sown. However, these enormous and praiseworthy efforts paled into insignificance once the guerrilla conflict turned into a large-scale, modem war and it became necessary to call not just upon those who had received military and political training, but upon the entire Angolan people. It was an atrocious war in which one had to keep a lookout for both mercenaries and snakes, rockets and cannibals. One Cuban conunander fell at the height of battle into an elephant trap. The black Africans, conditioned by centuries of hatred of the Portuguese, were initially hostile to the white Cubans. Especially in Cabinda, Cuban scouts often heard their presence reported by the primitive telegraphy of the drum, whose tum-tum could be heard everywhere within a radius of some 35 kilometers. On the other side, the white South African soldiers, who would fire on ambulances with 140mm guns, used to throw up smoke screens on the battlefield in order to recover their white dead, but left their black dead to the vultures. In the home of the UNITA minister who lived in the comfort appropriate to his rank, the men of the MPLA found in his refrigerator jars of viscera and bottles of frozen blood taken from the war prisoners he had eaten.

Nothing but bad news reached Cuba. On December 11 at Hengo, where a strong FAPLA [People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola] offensive was under way against the South African invaders, a Cuban armored car with four commanders on board ventured on to a track where sappers had previously detected a number of mines. Although four vehicles had already passed through safely, the sappers advised the armored car not to take that particular route, whose only advantage was to save a few minutes when there seemed to be no need for great haste. Hardly had the car started on the track when it was blown up by a mine. Two commanders of the special-forces battalion were seriously wounded. ***Raúl Díaz Arguelles***, commander of the internationalist operation in Angola, a hero of the anti-Batista struggle and an extremely popular figure in Cuba, was killed on the spot. This was one of the most bitter pieces of news for the Cubans, but it was not to be the last in their streak of bad luck. The very next day the Catofe disaster occurred-perhaps the biggest setback of the whole war. This is what happened: a South

African column, having managed to repair a bridge on the river Nhia with unexpected speed, crossed over under cover of an early-morning mist and caught the Cubans unawares in a tactical retreat. Analysis of the incident shows it to have been the result of a Cuban error. A European solider with a great deal of experience in the Second World War later thought this assessment too severe and declared to a top Cuban leader: "You have no idea what a war blunder means." For the Cubans, however, it was that and much worse, given that the party congress was just five days away.

Fidel Castro kept himself informed of the minutest details of the war. He personally saw off every ship bound for Angola, having previously addressed the fighting units in the La Cabaña theater; he himself sought out the commanders of the special-forces battallion who went on the first flight and drove them in his own Soviet jeep right to the aircraft stairs. It is probable that on each one of these occasions Fidel Castro had to suppress a feeling of envy for those who were going off to a war that he could not see. By then, there was not a single dot on the map of Angola that he was unable to identify, nor any feature of the land that he did not know by heart. His absorption in the war was so intense and meticulous that he could quote any statistic relating to Angola as if it were Cuba itself, and he spoke of its towns, customs and peoples as if he had lived there all his life.

In the early stages of the war, when the situation was urgent, Fidel Castro would spend up to fourteen hours at a stretch in the command room of the general staff, at times without eating or sleeping, as if he were on the battlefield himself. He followed the course of battles with pins on n-finutely detailed wau-sized maps, keeping in constant touch with the MPLA high command on a battlefield where the time was six hours later. In those uncertain days some of its reactions showed his confidence of ultimate victory. Thus when a FAPLA combat unit was forced to dynamite a bridge in order to slow down the advance of the South African armored columns, Fidel Castro suggested to them in a message: "Don't blow up any more bridges or you won't be able to pursue them later." He was right. Scarcely a couple of weeks later, brigades of Cuban and Angolan engineers had to repair thirteen bridges in twenty days to catch up with the routed invaders.

>On December 22, at the closing session of the party congress, Cuba officially announced for the first time that it had combat troops in Angola. Although the outcome of the war was still undecided, Fidel Castro revealed in his final speech that the invasion of Cabinda had been crushed in seventy-two hours; that on the northern front ***Holden Roberto's*** troops, who had been within 25 kilometers of Luanda on November 10, had been compefled to retreat more than a hundred kilometers; and that the South African armored columns, which had advanced more than 700 kilometers in less than twenty days, had been checked just over 200 kilometers from Luanda and could advance no further. The rigorous report gave considerable grounds for optimism, but victory was still far off.

- ***The Tide Turns***

The Angolans' luck had improved by January 12, when the OAU Tconference opened in Addis Ababa. A few days before, troops under the command of ***Víctor Schueg Colás*** huge and affable

black Cuban commander who had been a car mechanic before the revolution- had driven Holden Roberto from his ephemeral capital of Cannona, occupied the town and, a couple of hours later, captured the nearby military base of Negage. Cuban aid had by then reached such an intensity that there were thirteen ships en route to Luanda in early January. The generalized MPLA offensive proved unstoppable and tipped the scales in its favor once and for all. Indeed, it acquired such force that on the southern front, by n-lid-january the MPLA was already conducting offensive operations that had been planned for April.

Whereas South Africa possessed ***Canberra*** aircraft, and Zaire ***Mirages*** and ***Fiats***, Angola had had no air force since the Portuguese had destroyed the bases before withdrawing. It could 'just make use of a few antiquated ***DC-3s*** which the Cuban pilots had brought into service. At times, these had to land by night with their load of wounded soldiers on runways din-dy fit by irnprovised lanterns; they would reach their destination with reeds and forest flowers entangled in the wheels. At a certain point, Angola was supplied with a squadron of MIG 17s together with a complement of Cuban pilots, but these were held in reserve by the military high command for use only in the defense of Luanda.

At the beginning of March the northern front was liberated, with the defeat of the British and Yankee mercenaries who had been quietly recruited by the CIA in a desperate, last-ditch operation. All the troops, along with the entire general staff, were then concentrated on the southern front. The Benguela railway had already been secured, and UNITA was collapsing in such disorder that a MPLA rocket destroyed the house at Gago Cutinho which ***Jonas Savimbi*** had occupied less than an hour before.

From the middle of March onwards, the South African troops went into a headlong retreat, no doubt following instructions from the highest authorities. They were afraid that the MPLA would pursue the retreating forces through occupied Namibia and carry the war on to the territory of South Africa itself-an action that would certainly have met with the support of the whole of black Africa and of the great majority of United Nations countries opposed to racial discrimination. The Cuban fighters had no doubt that this was the aim, when they were instructed to transfer en masse to the southern front. But on March 27, when the fleeing South Africans crossed the border and took refuge in Namibia, the MPLA received ordy one order: to occupy the abandoned dams and ensure the well being of the workers of every nationality. At 9.15am on April 1, the MPLA advance guard, under the command of the Cuban ***Leopoldo Cintras Frías***, reached the dam at Ruacana-a stone's throw away from the chicken-wire fencing that marks the frontier. An hour and a quarter later, the South African governor of Namibia, General ***Ewefp***, requested permission to cross the border with two of his officers and open negotiations with the MPLA. Commander Cintras Frías received them in a wooden hut erected in the 10-meter no-man's-land separating the two countries, and the delegations sat down with their interpreters to discuss around a large dining table. General Ewefp, a bald, chubby man of fifty who did his best to convey an impression of acuteness and congeniality, accepted all the MPLA conditions without reservation. Two hours were spent over the agreement, but the meeting went on since General Ewefp had a succulent lunch brought over for everyone from the Namibian side; while they were

eating, he used the beer to propose a number of toasts and recounted to his enemies how he had lost the little finger of his right hand in a road accident.

At the end of May, ***Henry Kissinger*** visited the Swedish Prime Minister, ***Olof Palme***, in Stockholm; just before leaving, he expressed his joy before the world's press that Cuban troops were withdrawing from Angola. The information was contained, or so it was said, in a personal letter from ***Fidel Castro*** to Palme. Kissinger's joy was understandable, for the evacuation of Cuban troops would relieve him of one of the burdens he had to carry in front of a public opinion aroused by the election campaign. In fact, Fidel Castro had not sent any letter to Olof Palme on that occasion. Nevertheless, the report was essentially correct, even though incomplete. The troop withdrawal schedule had been agreed between Fidel Castro and Agostinho Neto at their March 14 meeting in Conakry, when victory was already assured. They decided that the Cubans would withdraw gradually, leaving behind for as long as necessary enough men to organize a strong, modem army, capable of guaranteeing Angola's future internal security and national independence without outside help.

Fidel Castro, Agostinho Neto, Raúl Castro and Osvaldo Dorticós in the Havana airport on July, 1976

Thus, when Kissinger made his deceitftil statement in Stockhohn, more than 3,000 fighters had already returned to Cuba, and many more were on the way. There were security reasons for keeping secret the details of repatriation. However, Esther Lidia Díaz Rodríquez, the first woman to be sent out and one of the first soldiers to be flown home, provided fresh evidence of the Cubans' skill in finding everything out. Esther was kept at Havana Naval Hospital for a compulsory medical checkup before her parents were informed of her return. After forty-eight hours, she was allowed to leave and took a taxi home from the corner of the street. But although she hardly exchanged a word with the driver, he refused to accept her fare because she had been to Angola. "How did you know?" Esther asked im, perplexed. The driver replied: "I'd already seen you on the Naval Hospital terrace, and the only people there are ones who have returned from Angola."

It was about this time that Fidel arrived in Havana. Already at the airport I had the distinct feeling that something very profound had happened in the life of Cuba since I had last been there a year before. The change was indefinable but quite evident in the people's mood as well as the spontaneity of things, animals and the sea: it touched the very heart of Cuban life. There was a new men's fashion for lightweight suits with shortsfeeved jackets; Portuguese words had found their way into the latest slang; old African strains reappeared in new popular tunes. There were more fively discussions than usual in the shop queues and crowded buses, between those who had been detemiined partisans of the Angola action and those who were orgy now beginning to grasp its full significance. However, the most interesting and impressive phenomenon was the awareness that many repatriated soldiers had of their contribution to changing world history,

even though they behaved with the naturalness and modesty of one who has simply done his duty.

Perhaps they themselves did not realize that on another level - which while it may be less noble is also more human-even Cubans lacking in great passion felt compensated for the many years of unjust setbacks through which they had lived. In 1970, when the ten-miflion-ton sugar harvest failed, Fidel Castro begged his people to turn defeat into victory. But in reality, the Cubans had been doing just that for too long a time, with a steadfast political consciousness and unassailable moral fortitude. Since the victory at the ***Bay of Pigs*** fifteen years ago, they have had to swallow with gritted teeth the murder of Che Guevara in Bolivia and of President ***Salvador Allende*** during the Chilean catastrophe; they have suffered the liquidation of the guerrilla struggle in Latin America, the endless night of blockade, and the hidden and implacable gnawing of those numerous past mistakes that have at times brought them to the brink of disaster. All these experiences, flanking the irreversible but slow and arduous successes of the of revolution, must have created in the Cubans the feeling that they were being subjected to an undeserved penance. Angola finally gave them the satisfaction of the great victory that they so badly needed.