

Angola redefined

The Washington Times

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May 18, 2000

Sun Tzu, a Chinese warrior philosopher circa 450 BC, stated in "The Art of War," "The longer the war, the more and greater damage done, and even if you win, the gains will not make up for the losses. . . ."

After more than 25 years of war, Angola has received severe damage to its economy and society. Currently, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) government is at a standoff with the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). UNITA controls the diamond mines in Northeastern Angola, which helps finance its military campaign, while the MPLA government uses revenues from its oil industry to fund their effort. In the past few months, the rise in oil prices and profits will likely create a scenario where the MPLA government may try to militarily outspend its rival to try and change the balance of power.

From 1961-1974 the MPLA, National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), and UNITA were all fighting against the Portuguese colonialism. However, after finally winning independence, the MPLA moved to eliminate opposition groups, leaving only UNITA. During the Cold War, the Cubans and Russians then backed the MPLA communists. This, while South Africa and the United States, under President Reagan, supported democratic-leaning UNITA. According to Jardo Muekalia, the current UNITA adviser to Washington, this conflict has resulted in 500,000 deaths, with 160,000 of these people having died from unsanitary conditions and malnutrition.

During the Reagan years, the United States believed UNITA was a means to thwart the spread of communism in Africa, while creating back-pressure on the former Soviet Union. However, under the Clinton administration, the United States completely withdrew support from UNITA, effectively ending aid to a former ally. In essence, the United States surrendered Angola to the MPLA, which transformed Angola into an authoritarian kleptocracy bent on the destruction of all opponents.

This conflict is complicated even further by multilevel corruption, the lobbying by businesses, and the lack of good faith negotiations. The level of corruption in this area of Southern Africa seems unprecedented. In the case of Angola, UNITA and the MPLA government both use their revenues to try to influence external powers for backing and political muscle. For example, UNITA has convinced many neighboring countries to ignore United Nations' proclaimed illegal activities, like smuggling their diamonds abroad. While, companies like Chevron and DeBeers lobby Washington and other governments to maintain their advantage. Chevron also lobbies

the MPLA government to continue their contracts in Angola's rich oil fields in Cabinda. This because, if UNITA gains control, Chevron's position in Angola would likely become jeopardized.

Furthermore, UNITA's lack of faith in negotiations became fixed after the duplicitous assassination of their peace envoy and renowned democrat, Jeremias Chitunda, by the MPLA in 1992, while he was engaged in peace talks under a white flag in Luanda. So, to break this impasse, the United States should instead support out-of-country negotiations involving neutral elements of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) as a mediator in the conflict.

It is to be hoped that, under a future presidential administration, the United States will re-evaluate support for the now dysfunctional MPLA. We should again support a pluralist democratic approach, as America has done in other situations.

We also must examine the Angola problem from a more multifaceted perspective involving integrated socioeconomic, political and security aspects. In this regard, the war in Angola has affected the lives of civilians the most. Even the MPLA figures suggest 3.8 million, or a third of Angola's population, has been displaced by the conflict. Zoraida Mesa, the U.N. Humanitarian Coordinator for Angola warns: "The humanitarian situation is alarming. If current trends continue, the situation in Angola could deteriorate to the point of a crisis."

It is only after a negotiated cessation of hostilities, that a major economic relief effort can ameliorate the hardships of this brutal war. The United States and international community should be poised to rebuild Angola at this future point. Working together they have the funds, equipment, and means to carry out immediate microeconomic projects that could greatly improve life for all at the village level. Current relief efforts, only helping the MPLA side now, keep it away from serious negotiations and prolong the war.

Accordingly, the United States and the international community should be proactively promoting a just and viable peace in Angola while battlefield conditions are at a relative lull. In the present threat environment, this can only be achieved through aggressive third party mediation. This must happen before the combatants' growing coffers are spent purveying additional death and destruction without any sane results.

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