

The Massacre of Cassinga

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42 *Victims of the Cassinga Massacre, 4 May 1978: one of two mass graves*

Cassinga, 1978

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At daybreak on May 4, 1978, South African planes flew over Cassinga, a Namibian refugee camp in southern Angola. Claudia Ushona, who was then a sixteen-year old refugee living in the camp, recalls, "We were gathered outside to salute the flag when we saw white things falling from the sky. We thought it was our president [Sam Nujoma, president of SWAPO] sending us candy. We were eager to see him. We said, 'The president is coming! And he is bringing us candy!' We were living in a refugee camp, we were all dreaming of the candy the president would bring us. But they were bombs." [1]

After the bombs came the paratroopers. This was the massacre of Cassinga— more than 600 Namibians, mostly women and children were slaughtered by the soldiers of Apartheid. A United Nations delegation that visited Cassinga a few days later reported: "What the South Africans did was criminal in legal terms and savage in moral terms. It reminds us of the darkest moments in modern history." [2]

Western governments barely reacted to the massacre. In the UN Security Council, the United States and its allies opposed sanctions against South Africa. President Jimmy Carter, self-styled champion of human rights, told reporters, "The South Africans claim that it was just a retaliatory raid against the SWAPO forces who had invaded Namibia with small strikes, and they've claimed to have withdrawn and have not left any South African forces in Angola. So we hope it's just a transient strike in retaliation and we hope it's all over." [3]

The head of the Cuban Civilian Mission in Angola, Jorge Risquet, astutely explained the significance of this reaction to Nujoma, "No one can guarantee that South Africa won't carry out a similar attack tomorrow against a SWAPO camp or an Angolan village or town. In things like this, it is the first act of aggression that incurs the highest political cost. If the South Africans were ever going to be held accountable for their aggression, well, they would have been condemned for Cassinga – and they weren't. This means that they are free to repeat acts of aggression like this again and again. Remember, Nujoma, that when the Yankees first bombed North

Vietnam, the world was outraged. Nevertheless, the Yankees kept bombing Vietnam." [4]

A few weeks after the massacre, the first group Namibian children, six hundred strong, most of whom were survivors of Cassinga, arrived in Cuba to study and grow up far from the South African bombs. No other country in the world opened its doors so widely and so generously to the Namibian refugees.

Cuba offered more than hospitality: it also offered the lives of its people. As Risquet said, on May 4, 1978, "Cubans and Namibians shed their blood together for the first time fighting against the South African racists." A Cuban unit that had been based at Tchamutete, 16 kilometers south of Cassinga, immediately advanced under the strafing and bombs of the South African planes to confront the aggressor; it paid for its valor with 16 dead and more than 80 wounded. "The [Cuban] comrades of Tchamutete were very brave," President Agostinho Neto commented. Looking back, the South African historian of the operation wrote in 1982, "the South Africans who monitored their approach with such foreboding that day pay tribute to the courage of the Cubans who pushed forward in spite of the imminent danger of being knocked out by aircraft against which they had no defenses at all." [5]

A decade later, on May 4, 1988, the South African Defense Force (SADF) celebrated the tenth anniversary of the massacre with a military parade in the northern Namibian town of Oshakati. General Ian Gleeson, chief of staff of the SADF, boasted that the raid had been "the most successful paratroop operation of its kind anywhere in the world since World War Two." The parade was "an impressive show of strength," the Johannesburg Star noted, but the Namibian people commemorated the massacre with an unprecedented show of defiance. Holding black banners with the words, "Cassinga, 1978-88 – We remember," demonstrators congregated in massive rallies and marched through the streets of Katatura, the black township adjoining white Windhoek, and other Namibian towns, defying rubber bullets and teargas. "Only when Namibia is independent will there be no more Kassingas," the General Secretary of the Council of Churches in Namibia declared. "It makes us weep more bitterly when we know that the Western countries which like to speak so loudly of democracy and human rights (Britain, United States and Germany) actually collaborate with South Africa to perpetuate our suffering and delay our independence. We refuse to accept their hypocritical excuses that we, the Africans, would suffer most if mandatory sanctions are imposed on South Africa. We refuse to be consoled by spokespersons of these governments until these governments have become reasonable in terms of human rights. ... We cry and refuse to be comforted because we value and respect life,

liberty, freedom and independence of all our people. We are children of God who are entitled to take our rightful place as a free people amongst the nations." [6]

While the South Africans were celebrating in Namibia, powerful Cuban forces in southern Angola were advancing toward the Namibian border. Havana's strategy in the military campaign of 1988 had been to first break the South African onslaught against Cuito Cuanavale and then to attack in another direction – in the southwest, through Cunene. "By going there [to Cuito] we placed ourselves in the lion's jaws," Fidel Castro explained. "We accepted the challenge. And from the first moment we planned to gather our forces to attack in another direction, like a boxer who with his left hand blocks the blow and with his right – strikes." [7]

On March 23, 1988, the South African attack against Cuito "was brought to a grinding and definite halt," in the words of a senior SADF officer. [8] The Cuban left hand had blocked the blow and the right hand was preparing to strike: Cuban columns were making their way through Cunene toward the Namibian border – more than ten thousand soldiers, with Cuba's most modern tanks, formidable artillery, and very sophisticated mobile anti-aircraft systems. "At any other time," US intelligence reported, "Pretoria would have regarded the Cuban move as a provocation, requiring a swift and strong response. But the Cubans moved with such dispatch and on such a scale that an immediate South African military response would have involved serious risks." [9] The South Africans proclaimed that the Cuban advance posed a "serious" military threat to Namibia and that it could precipitate "a terrible battle." [10] But they gave ground. On May 27, the banner headline in the Namibian, the newspaper most read by the black population of Namibia, declared "Build-Up on the Border." But for the first time since 1976 it was not the SADF, massing to invade Angola. This time, in the words of general Jannie Geldenhuys, chief of the SADF, "Heavily armed Cuban and SWAPO forces, integrated for the first time, have moved south within sixty kilometers of the Namibian border." The SADF, the Namibian commented sarcastically, were engaged in "an unusual advance offensive in the direction of the Orange River," which marked the border between South Africa and Namibia. [11] A few days later Geldenhuys warned: "The southward advance of very heavily armed Cuban troops, along a front 450 kilometers wide, has changed the status quo decidedly with serious military and political implications." [12] In Windhoek, the South African Administrator General of Namibia, Luis Pienaar, publicly acknowledged that Cuban MIG-23s were flying over Namibia, a dramatic reversal from happier times in which the skies had belonged to the South African Air Force. He added that "the presence of the Cubans had caused a flutter of anxiety throughout the RSA [Republic of South Africa]." [13] Among whites, that is. For the blacks of Namibia, and of South Africa, the advance of the Cuban columns toward the border, pushing back the troops of Apartheid, raised a tidal wave of hope. Ahead of the columns, which included

Angolan troops and 2000 SWAPO insurgents, were reconnaissance patrols of Cuban Special Forces and SWAPO guerrillas. The Cubans remember their Namibian comrades with respect and affection. "They had so much experience, and they were very brave and very intelligent," Pedro Ross Fonseca, who was then a young Special Forces lieutenant, recollected, while showing me a yellowish photo that he keeps in his wallet, a treasured memento of the common struggle and shared dreams. "Without them we could not have accomplished our mission as successfully as we did." [14]

While Castro's troops advanced toward Namibia, Cubans, Angolans, South Africans, and Americans were sparring at the negotiating table. For the South Africans and Americans the burning question was: Would the Cuban troops stop at the border? It was to answer this question that President Ronald Reagan's Assistant Secretary for Africa, Chester Crocker, sought Risquet. "My question is the following," he told him: "Does Cuba intend to halt the advance of its troops at the border between Namibia and Angola?" Risquet replied, "I have no answer to give you. I can't give you a Meprobamato [a well-known Cuban tranquillizer] – not to you or to the South Africans. ... I have not said whether or not our troops will stop. ... Listen to me, I am not threatening. If I told you that they will not stop, it would be a threat. If I told you that they will stop, I would be giving you a Meprobamato, a Tylenol, and I want neither to threaten you nor to reassure you ... What I have said is that the only way to guarantee [that our troops stop at the border] would be to reach an agreement [on the independence of Namibia]." [15] On August 25, Crocker cabled Secretary of State George Shultz: "Reading the Cubans is yet another art form. They are prepared for both war and peace ... We witness considerable tactical finesse and genuinely creative moves at the table. This occurs against the backdrop of Castro's grandiose bluster and his army's unprecedented projection of power on the ground." [16]

Five days later, on August 30, 1988, the last South African soldiers left Angola. As the army trucks and armored cars entered Rundu, the Namibian border town that was their point of entry, a huge banner proclaimed "Welcome Winners." "Perhaps the 'Welcome home winners' banner erected in Rundu was an attempt to boost the morale of the returning SADF troops," the Namibian noted, "but in reality they did not come back as winners." [17] The White Giants had been defeated, the Namibian people knew it, and this gave them encouragement in their struggle.

On December 22, 1988, in the New York agreements, the South Africans finally accepted what they had so bitterly opposed: the independence of Namibia. The history of what really happened in that memorable year of 1988 has yet to be written. So far only the powerful, and their clients, have written about it, and their accounts manipulate and deform the facts and are filled with outright lies; some

even claim that the negotiations that led to the New York agreements were between Angola, South Africa and the United States, erasing the Cuban contribution. The Cuban and US documents, however, despite the ideological divide that separates them, reveal the truth: the New York agreements would not have been possible without the Cubans' prowess on the battlefield and their skill at the negotiating table. Despite Washington's best efforts to stop it, Cuba changed the course of southern African history. Today, when the United States is the world's only superpower, it is more important than ever to remember the crime of Cassinga and tell the true story of the liberation of southern Africa.

This is why I listened with such pleasure, on December 2, 2005, in Havana, to the words of Claudia Ushona, survivor of Cassinga, graduate of Cuban schools, SWAPO fighter, and now the Namibian ambassador to Cuba. After stating, in her Cuban accented Spanish, that her country is free and sovereign thanks to Cuba, she said: "The ties that unite our two peoples are and will be eternal. Time has passed, but Cuba has continued to offer us generous help in areas such as like education, health, fishing, and agriculture... To have witnessed the massacre of Cassinga, perpetrated by the South African army in the service of Apartheid, to have studied in this beautiful island, and now to return here as my country's ambassador – these are facts that bear witness to the greatness of the epoch we lived through and to the historical ties between Cuba and Africa." [18]

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Piero Gleijeses (left) and Jorge Risquet

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