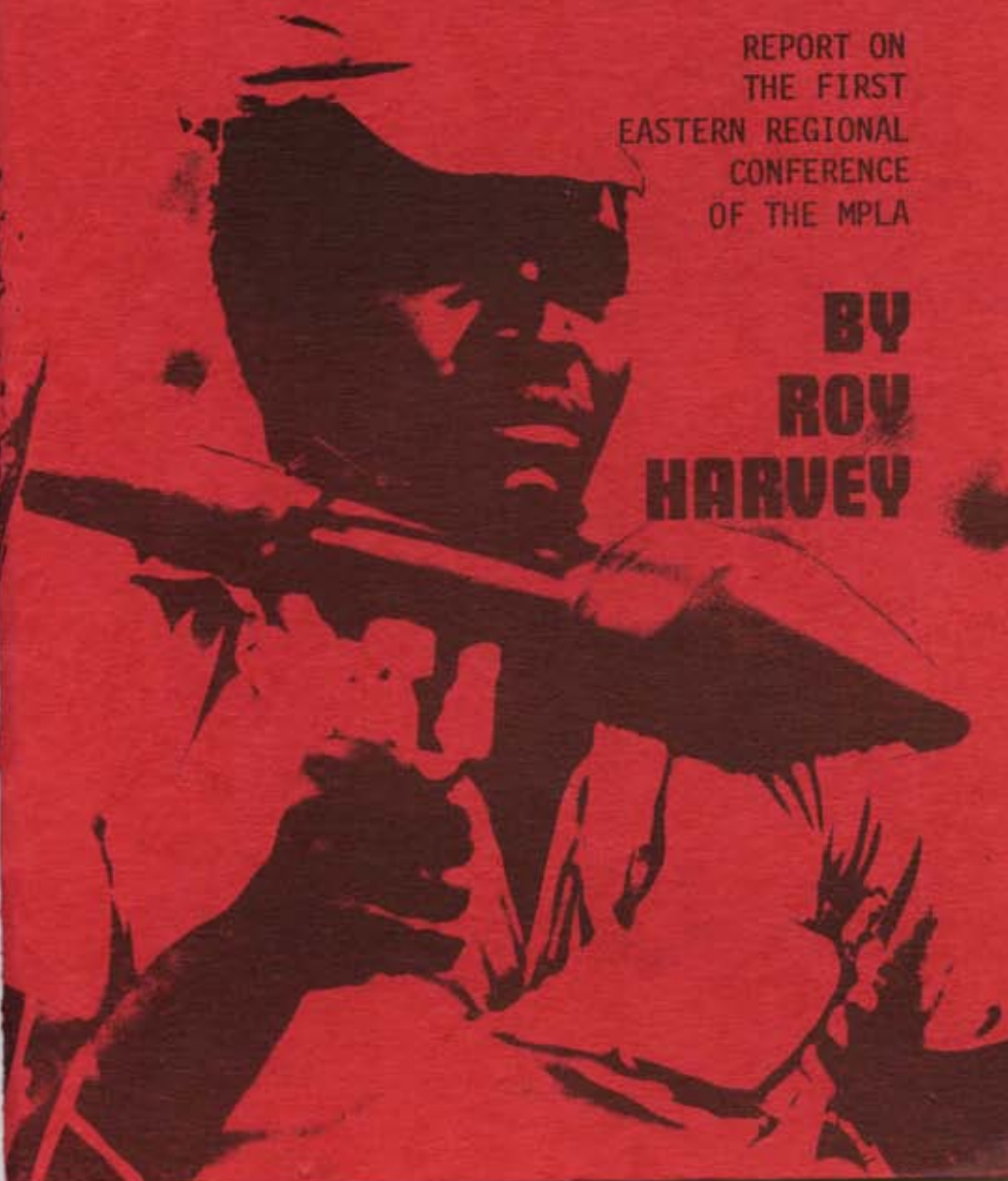


PEOPLE'S WAR IN ANGOLA

REPORT ON
THE FIRST
EASTERN REGIONAL
CONFERENCE
OF THE MPLA

BY
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PEOPLE'S WAR IN ANGOLA



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ANGOLA



PEOPLE'S WAR IN ANGOLA

REPORT ON THE FIRST EASTERN REGIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE MPLA

Just over two years ago, in May 1966, the armed struggle began in the Eastern Region of Angola. This Third Region of the MPLA is now entering a new phase of the revolution. The Portuguese have become increasingly isolated in their diminishing number of posts; they are dependent on aircraft for supplies; troop movement on the ground is subject to certain ambush. The sole purpose of the Portuguese in the Eastern Region is to stall: stall the MPLA at all costs before they turn the eastern part of Angola (an area four times the size of Portugal) into a fully liberated base area....

The Portuguese rely on the traditional reactionary trump card: air power. Meanwhile, MPLA organizes the people; builds clinics and schools (Centers for Revolutionary Instruction); combats the tribalism which the Portuguese have for centuries found advantageous in maintaining the disunity of the Angolan people. The MPLA develops literacy and cultural programs, teaches modern agricultural methods, and builds cadres. The struggle is extended further into Angola. The Portuguese and their backers, the Americans, South Africans, West Germans and the others are being driven into the sea with what wealth they can grab up in their last moment's rape. Colonialism and imperialism have no future in Angola.

The First Eastern Regional Conference, assembling 85 delegates from the five zones, was itself a quiet illustration of MPLA's success in winning the support of the peasantry, and was the implementation of an earlier decision to transfer MPLA headquarters from Brazzaville to inside Angola.

One isn't invited to attend a conference of this nature, and once there, really doesn't attend. An expressed invitation could jeopardize the whole of the conference - over 200 lives. It wasn't until four hours before going into Angola that President Agostinho Neto and Eastern Regional Director Anibal de Melo briefed us (Tom Chibaye of the Zambia Mail, Don Barnett and myself; four other journalists were waiting at the Provisional Campside Angola) on the nature of the assembly that we would first observe. My primary purpose in Angola was to shoot footage for a film.

Our group setting out from Zambia initially consisted of about 40 people; and included Dr. Neto, Anibal de Melo, Maria Carlos (acting head of the Angolan Women's Organization), other members of the Eastern Regional Steering Committee, other MPLA militants, and the journalists. Our number more than doubled at the Angolan border, when we were met by Commander Spartacus Monimambu and a detachment of armed guerrillas which would escort us to the Provisional Camp.

The Conference was an important one, but had been postponed for several reasons. Delegates from five zones had been waiting for weeks; many of the guerrillas had been waiting for months. Not waiting idly, as was evident from the work that had gone into the building of the extensive camp, and there were classes to attend, patrols, etc. But waiting! One of the most difficult aspects of the armed struggle is the waiting. There is skill in knowing how to wait, but sometimes there's nothing



MPLA President Agostinho Neto speaking to delegates of the First Eastern Regional Conference. Commander Monimambu (center) and Eastern Region Director Anibal de Melo.

to do - nothing to do while hidden in ambush for six, seven, eight days....

Though the Conference would be further postponed until our group arrived, it was several times necessary to part from our course to meet with the villagers. These were villagers without villages. Their homes had been bombed or burnt, or were subject to continual Portuguese air reconnaissance. The villagers had makeshift living areas in the bush; many of the peasants slept in the open; their few possessions had been destroyed by the Portuguese; their source of water was never near; their cassava fields were now camouflaged patches on the periphery of the forest.

Several times the peasants came to meet our group. As we walked single-file in a line that must have stretched out over a mile, we could hear singing a great distance away: MPLA liberation songs sung in Mbunda and Portuguese. Some of these songs were about the President of MPLA.

Dr. Neto (pronounced neh-tu) is himself a living legend in Angola. One of the founders of MPLA in 1956, Agostinho Neto has been an active voice for his people for over 20 years. As early as 1947 he published poetry expressing the sufferings of the Angolan people, and in 1952 was arrested for taking part in anti-colonial demonstrations. While practicing medicine in the village of Icolo e Bengo, he was arrested in June, 1960. In the course of the struggle he has been imprisoned four times by the Portuguese.



Villagers - members of the People's Militia - approaching MPLA guerrillas and cadres, singing liberation songs.

One group of peasants which came to meet, listen to and talk with their President Neto could be seen several miles away: they were on the other side of a large plain which we both had to circle because of Portuguese reconnaissance planes which were especially active near the border. As we walked toward each other, their beautiful melancholy songs became more jubilant; at some point, the guerrillas in our group joined them in singing. The finale of the music was the coming together of the peasants and the guerrillas and leaders of the MPLA, with everybody embracing and shaking hands. The traditional greeting in this area is to clap your own hands together softly, then shake hands, then clap your hands again. It is very difficult to take photos while greeting people; the next time, I decided to shoot some film. When another meeting did occur, I managed to climb a small tree in order to get good footage of the event, but it was



Villagers and guerrillas meet. Spartacus Monimambu, center.

useless. Some of the villagers climbed the tree to greet me, saying "Boa dia, camarada!" I don't pretend to know what they thought of me in my tree, but before many people climbed up the tree, I climbed down; I never got really good pictures of these beautiful events - the coming together of the peasants and the guerrillas and MPLA leadership.

After meeting, the local militia would perform parade exercises and President Neto would formally greet then walk through an inspection of their ranks. The young militia boys and girls, some as young as seven or eight, were barefoot, with rags for clothing and sticks for rifles; they performed exacting drill. The older militiamen were armed with axes, bows and arrows, spears and knives. One militia leader had an ancient shotgun.



Villagers and MPLA leadership



A People's Militia leader



"A villager entertaining guerrillas with music



MPLA guerrilla detachment and leadership

During our trip of about 40 miles, there were three such meetings with the villagers. Our whole group would leave the area where we first met and go in the direction of the temporary village; the older militiamen were exuberant, running ahead of us, then back to our caravan and off toward the village again. When we reached the village we were greeted by more singing and were offered chairs, water, and sweet potatoes (called "American potatoes"). These meetings would begin with introductions: the Regional Commander would introduce President Neto and the others. Dr. Neto then spoke and was translated into Mbunda. The agenda of the meetings varied, but usually the older men spoke after the MPLA leadership. I was surprised at the articulation; though I couldn't understand a word of the local language, it was clear that there wasn't the least bit of hesitancy, no fear, no obsequiousness. When the villagers' speeches were



President Neto, speaking to villagers



Peasant digging potatoes near abandoned village

translated into Portuguese, they went something like this: "MPLA has kept the Portuguese away. UNITA tricked us, attacking the Portuguese, then running away themselves, and then many villagers were killed. With MPLA we don't fear the Portuguese over-running us. They can no longer come and take us for forced labor; they can't do with us as they please. We are proud to be a part of MPLA. We



Villagers are activists in the MPLA

have the revolution in our hearts, and we are fighters. We kill the hunger in our guerrillas' stomachs by growing food. Victory or Death. Victory is Certain! But there is another problem facing us now. The Portuguese no longer over-run us from the ground, they bomb us from the air. Something must be done about the bombers and helicopters. Some people have been killed. Give us the weapons to fight them."

Some of the people in this area near the border had been "organized" by Savimbi's UNITA. UNITA began its activity in this region about the same time as MPLA. When the Portuguese retaliated against UNITA attacks, its militants fled, running back across the border into Zambia. The Portuguese killed many of the peasants who remained in their villages.

On several occasions, the peasants were interested in hearing from the journalists. How did the people of Zambia view the struggle? How did the Americans see the Angolan revolution? Tom Chibaye declared that he was impressed with the determination, the discipline, the beauty of the people who were fighting this war against a ruthless enemy, saying that President Kaunda and the people of Zambia were behind their comrades of the MPLA.

Our claims (Barnett's and mine) were more modest, since it was American bombers, American napalm, American helicopters, etc., that were being used against the Angolan people, and the U.S. Government was a major (if silent) backer of Portuguese colonialism. We did declare that there were a number of progressive people in the U.S. who morally supported the Angolans' just struggle, and that some believed they had a revolutionary duty to actively support the MPLA in the struggle against imperialism.

Here in Angola we could certainly see many ways such support could be utilized. We hoped our journalistic efforts would also be of some value.

A "speech" such as the above takes a long time when it is translated twice. After it is over, the tradition in this area is for the speaker to applaud his own statements. The sentiment seems to be that what is appreciated is the statement, the ideas being presented, and not the speaker; so if the person who says a thing honestly agrees with it, he can join in with the others in appraisal.



A makeshift settlement in the thick underbrush



Young MPLA guerrilla with bazooka shells



MPLA combatant



When we got going, our caravan moved quite fast, but compared with the normal speed of the guerrillas, we were dawdlers. This was clear from the escort detachment's constantly walking from the beginning to the end of our long column, back and forth checking our advance, moving people ahead, spreading them apart, helping with loads and so on. These guerrillas carried packs and weapons. It was necessary that they be very mobile, so their loads were nothing compared to the carriers, mostly young boys - they carried heavy war materials, food, blankets, etc. They wore rags: trousers of patched patches, shirts that were seams with tattered strings hanging from them; most of the carriers were barefoot - their feet were thick with calluses from the hot sand and thousands of miles.

When we left the last village, it was dark - only another three or four hours walk to the Provisional Camp. It was a pitch black night - not a star. We were given a password. I wrote it down. A lot of good that would have done in the total darkness. I repeated it over and over, then forgot it. Our pace picked up. There was no talking: very little sound except for the monotonous swishing of branches hitting yourself and your comrades. Somehow one becomes slightly delirious in this kind of walking. The deep sand and the blackness contribute to your disequilibrium. Walking must remain an unconscious action; if it becomes conscious, it's a real nuisance. Which leg to move? How high and how far to step and so forth. I was absorbed in this problem; we were moving much faster and were quieter - it seemed as if we were sneaking past a Portuguese post which was probably less than 50 yards away. Portuguese were everywhere. And then somebody shouted HALT! Someone up ahead answered MPLA! (em-peh-la) and the Mbunda password. I almost fell apart. What about the Portuguese post? They had to have heard that! My walking became an unconscious activity again.



"Guerra", Chefe do Grupo

The Portuguese didn't hear, apparently, as we were allowed to wind our way past three more MPLA sentries who stood at attention as our group passed. We reached the Provisional Camp, and waited silently for about 15 minutes before the rest of our group wound its way into the camp. Lanterns were turned on low. A column of over a hundred guerrillas and cadres stood at attention. When President Neto arrived, the awaiting detachment began singing - the strongest, most forceful and beautiful singing I have ever heard; but for the first 30 seconds it seemed like complete adventurism - after all, there was a revolution going on, and there were supposed to be Portuguese in these parts.



MPLA guerrillas and cassava - the diet of the Angolan militant

The Portuguese post was about eight miles away, I was to learn, and they rarely ventured out of the post in the day-time, let alone at night. The Provisional Camp was well guarded, for miles around. The only danger was from the air, but as the camp was chosen specifically for the purpose of the Conference, it was thoroughly hidden in the thick underbrush; Portuguese interference was unlikely.

The extensive camp was divided into three areas. The parade grounds and kitchen areas, with a few informal assembly huts, tables and chairs constituted the camp center. The sleeping areas, a

bout two miles away, contained dispersed two-person huts. The third part of the camp consisted of assembly areas; there were at least three meeting places several miles, and in different directions, from the camp. On the periphery of the camp center was a small school, and a clinic where Dr. Boavida had worked before the Conference began. The many months of preparation and work put into this camp would be abandoned after the Conference, as the spot was not strategically important. The original site for the Conference was Hanoi I, but it had been bombed May 24, 1968.

The journalists were invited to the opening session of the Conference. For the next two days, except informally late in the evening, we did not see the 85 attending delegates. In addition to the three of us, there was Aquino Bragança for Algeria, Stefano de Stefani and Augusta Conchiglia from Italy, and Jacques Roy from Canada. We were assigned to Comrade Biekman (our responsavel) during the Conference. On the third day, we attended the closing session of the assembly, were informed of the resolutions, and were invited to ask questions. Eighteen papers had been presented; seven new members were elected to the Steering Committee; two members were expelled.



Assembled delegates at the First Eastern Regional Conference, listening to a speech given by Commander Monimambu



Guerrilla "Fronteira" stands guard, Eastern Regional Conference



MPLA activists - villagers



MPLA guerrilla - barefoot but armed

The subject matter of the Conference was as President Neto and de Melo had briefed us. The main item on the agenda was a review of MPLA policies and their implementation since the creation of the Third Region. The objective of the Conference was to discuss the implementation of their earlier decision to generalize the armed struggle to all the regions of Angola, rather than try to achieve fully liberated zones.

Other items of major importance were the creation of a regular army and the transformation of MPLA, a broad based popular movement, into a political party. Both topics were discussed extensively and will be brought up again at MPLA's next National Congress. Presently, material conditions do not exist for the creation of a regular army in addition to the guerrilla forces, but this will be necessary in the next major stage of the liberation struggle. The infrastructure for a political party exists within MPLA, composed of the military and political commanders, other members of the regional committees, the Central Committee and the Executive Committee.



Small houses and the vegetation

One of the items discussed and ratified was the decision to accept whites, born or presently living in Angola, as active MPLA supporters. The reason for this decision is simple: MPLA is not fighting white people, but rather the Portuguese colonial structure and imperialist neo-colonial penetration. One final item was the composition of a telegram to be sent to Mobutu of Congo (Kinshasa), demanding that he return the MPLA men and arms which had been captured by his government.

Before the Conference closed, the Center of Revolutionary Instruction presented a play - an historical epic in rough Brechtian style. Most of the people at the assembly camp and many young militiamen from surrounding villages were in the audience. The actors were divided from the audience by a string of canvas that the narrator closed after each scene.



Villagers of the Eastern Region

The action began about 500 years ago, in the kingdom of Ngola along the Angolan coast. The actors depicted friendly Portuguese, bringing gifts and smiling. The Angolan people welcomed them. The curtains closed and the narrator explained, in Mbunda and Portuguese, the passage of time: the industrial revolution was taking place in Europe. The holy triumvirate of soldier, merchant, and priest joined together to find cheap raw materials and cheap labor. The curtains opened on the next scene: the actors depicted still smiling Portuguese, but their eyes saw profit, not people. The priests baptized captive Angolans by the hundreds of thousands, soldiers herded the slaves onto boats as if they were cattle, and the merchants sailed away. Scene after scene depicted the development of Portuguese colonialism and the underdevelopment and destruction of the Angolan economy and culture.



A scene from play presented by the CIR at the First Eastern Regional Conference



Portuguese technical superiority (acted by representing the Portuguese as machines - whether jeeps or wagons, muskets or helicopters) all but eliminated the Angolan people. New demands, new brutality, centuries of slavery, many but isolated Angolan rebellions, protests, repression. Modern times came; post World War II independence in Africa, but slavery still in Angola. Then the appearance of the MPLA, the beginning of the armed struggle, MPLA guerrillas in the villages, in the towns.

The narrator would explain and comment on a scene, then watch or wander through the play, observing, making mental notes as if seeing for the first time the history of colonialism, bringing spontaneity to his narration.

The young guerrillas and militants of the MPLA acted the characters and events of Angolan history in an almost detached style (playing with the people they acted, conscious of acting them and enjoying the idea of representation), but these actors knew from an intuitive Stanislavskian method how to imitate the details of the peasant actions, being mostly peasants themselves, and they knew from close study the mannerisms of the chefe do posto and Portuguese soldiers. The actors mocked in a very tender and compassionate way the misfortunes of the peasants and guerrillas, and portrayed the stupidity and inhumanity of the colonialist. The villainy of the Portuguese took on a comic aspect - the chefe do posto would become so angry and embittered he would turn into a monster, falling on the ground, kicking his feet, beating everyone he saw; his family, his cabos, himself.

The play lacked several important scenes: there was nothing said of U.S. and South African intervention, etc., but these scenes too will be recorded in Angolan history. The CIR presented an epic of heroic proportions; its audience was truly entertained "with the wisdom that comes from the solution of problems" and created theater with the love and anger that is the practical solution of ridding oneself of the oppressor. The drama was the presentation of the past and present as history, depicting the political organizing in the villages, clandestine activity in the cities, training of the guerrillas. The play is a work-in-progress. The last scene brought us right up to the present, to the exact moment of the First Eastern Regional Conference.



At the closing meeting of the Conference, President Neto stated that MPLA was a nationalist organization, willing to accept genuine help from all quarters, providing it comes without strings. He thanked those socialist and African countries which have assisted the Angolan people in their struggle for national liberation, adding that it was unfortunate that of all the African countries, help came only from Algeria, the United Arab Republic, Tanzania, Zambia, Congo (Brazzaville) and Guinea (Conakry). The Conference closed, as it had opened, with MPLA liberation songs.

liberation support movement

an excerpt from the LSM Constitution:

"Aims and Objectives"

"The major objective of the LSM is to provide concrete and meaningful support to genuine National Liberation Movements and Struggles within the U.S. - Dominated Imperialist System. Such support is to consist primarily of essential supplies, research and publicity, and technical aid.

"We believe that far too little practical and fraternal assistance has been given in support of National Liberation Movements by North Americans who are both capable and, in theory, desirous of providing such vitally needed support. The Liberation Support Movement was established in order to help resolve this glaring contradiction between theory and practice, between the potentiality and actuality of our own contribution to the anti-imperialist struggle."

"Within North America, vast human and material resources are at our disposal to serve the pressing needs of Imperialism's super-exploited masses in their just struggles to achieve genuine political, economic and cultural independence. Such struggles, and the peoples engaged in them, are in a very real sense our own. Though of different national, ethnic and linguistic groupings, we are all one people within the American Empire. The victories against exploitation and oppression achieved by our people in the "countryside" of the Empire serve to hasten the total destruction of the Imperialist System. They thus bring those of our people who dwell in the "metropole" of the American Empire closer to their own decisive victories and liberation.

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