

Angola Quicksand

BY COLIN DARCH

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In the first trip to Africa by a US president in over two decades, Bill Clinton visited six African nations – Ghana, Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa, Botswana and Senegal. Significantly, he didn't visit Angola, an important African trading partner of the US, and one of American foreign policy's economic successes or enduring embarrassments, depending on your point of view. So, instead of the Leader of the Free World, the Angolans got a visit on 30 March from Joseph Wilson, Clinton's assistant for African affairs, with a message from the president emphasizing his support for the peace process. Wilson, accompanied by spe-

cial envoy Paul Hare, told reporters it was essential that the last few steps in the process be taken: "We hope that all parties will respect the timetable," he added, without apparent irony or impatience.

No-show

It's not as if the Angolan government hadn't tried its hardest to persuade Clinton to come. "I don't understand why we spend \$1.2 million dollars a year for the services of three lobbying companies, and then we can't make the most of the investment," an Angolan diplomat based in the US told the Lisbon weekly *Expresso* before the president's trip. But the efforts of the expensive lobbying consultants, and even the vigorous support of US oil companies active in Angola, all failed to per-

suaude White House planners that a side trip to Luanda was a good idea.

There are some obvious reasons why the planners may have been right. Even though the US is Angola's number one trading partner, and the main mediator in the peace process, there is relatively little progress to show for American or UN involvement, and the potential for embarrassment remains high. The Angolan government and UNITA remain profoundly suspicious of each other, and UNITA's constant – and effective – delaying tactics in implementing the 1994 Lusaka Protocol have nonetheless left it more internationally isolated than ever before. The patience of the United Nations especially has worn dangerously thin, as it con-



John Liebenberg – Afrapix/Impact Visuals

South African military crossing the Kavango River as they withdrew from Angola in 1988



Joao Silva - PictureNET Africa

Savimbi at new headquarters in Bailundo on 7 Feb 95

tinues to expend millions of dollars on its fruitless Angolan operations. On 21 March this year, the Security Council endorsed a plan to withdraw peacekeepers from Angola by the end of July, calling on UNITA at the same time to complete demobilization and to end what the Council diplomatically referred to as "its pattern of delays."

The United Nations is not the only role player that is losing patience, however. "It isn't worth making the whole peace process depend on a meeting between José Eduardo dos Santos and Savimbi," an MPLA source told a Lisbon newspaper in February, adding in a threatening if somewhat mixed metaphor that "Angola cannot continue to be the orphan of the Lusaka Protocol - we may have to cut the [umbilical] cord."

In the meantime, as Clinton's entourage hit the road, the issues of the size of Jonas Savimbi's personal bodyguard in Luanda and the demobilization of UNITA forces at Bailundo were still being negotiated. UNITA was threatening to demand an unconditional lifting of the UN-approved sanctions against it as a precondition for continuing with the

peace process, and the government was saying that it would not nominate any UNITA members as ambassadors as long as UNITA continued to maintain offices in foreign countries. A Clinton visit during this slow and tortuous implementation of the peace process would have involved obvious political risks for the somewhat embattled president, under siege back home as a result of accumulating evidence of sexual misconduct, and needing a triumphant African progress above all things.[†]

Quicksand

The current phase of the peace process in Angola is now four years old, characterized throughout by delays, false starts and brinkmanship, most notably by UNITA, all tolerated, *nota bene*, by the US ad-

[†] There may have been other difficulties as well. Angolan government troops remain in both Congo Brazzaville and in Congo Kinshasa, to Washington's irritation. And although Luanda has signed a security agreement with Laurent Kabila's government, there is no such justification for their presence supporting President Denis Sassou-Nguesso, who came to power by a *coup d'état*.

ministration. The Angolan government and UNITA signed the Lusaka Protocol as long ago as 20 November 1994, after an even more prolonged negotiation process, during which UNITA especially combined delaying tactics with cynical attempts to gain military advantage through continued fighting. In the end, it was not even Savimbi himself, but UNITA secretary-general Eugenio Manuvakola who signed the document, as UNITA troops were driven from Huambo by government forces, and as international disapproval of the movement's manoeuvres hardened.

To implement the Protocol, the United Nations passed resolution 976 on 8 February 1995, establishing a new verification mission, UN-AVEM III, with 7,000 blue helmets, at an estimated cost of over \$380 million. A joint commission under UN supervision was also set up with government and UNITA representation, and three observer nations, the US, Russia and Portugal. But throughout everything that followed - meetings, resolutions, international pressure, the extension of the mandate for UN intervention, and the imposition of sanctions - Savimbi and UNITA have continued to delay and resist.

On 9 January this year, hope was rekindled that the process could keep moving, however slow the pace, with the Angolan government and UNITA signing what was described as a "final timetable agreement" [!] for implementing the aging Lusaka Protocol. Issues still to be resolved in January included deciding the size of Savimbi's security detachment, completing the demobilization of UNITA troops, and extending government control to municipalities, mainly in Moxico, Huambo and Malange provinces. Yet several serious incidents occurred during this last process, when tension between UNITA soldiers and armed government police detachments spilled over into fighting. Meanwhile, incidents such as the downing on 24 January of a private South African

transport aircraft, attempting to deliver diamond-mining equipment to UNITA at Andulo in Bié province, did nothing to reduce government suspicion of UNITA's good faith.

In the January timetable, UNITA had undertaken amongst other things to demobilize all its troops, hand over key areas to government control, move its headquarters to Luanda and convert its radio station into a non-partisan facility. At least senior UNITA officials were outspokenly frank about the move to the capital: "It's an illusion to think that Savimbi will go to Luanda so early," commented one of them.

Same old UNITA

None of the nine conditions for January had been met by the end of February, and yet another timetable had to be negotiated on 6 March. Just before this, at the beginning of March, a major crisis had threatened when UNITA appeared either unable or unwilling to meet a UN deadline for declaring the demobilization of all its troops, blaming the failure in the last resort on problems with its fax machines. It is still widely believed in Luanda that Savimbi has several thousand hidden troops in reserve, and a Voice of America report alleged in mid-February that a number were being trained in a camp across the border with Congo-Kinshasa. Although such reports remain unconfirmed, the discovery of arms caches in Uíje in January, for example, has sustained the suspicion that there may be some truth to the idea that UNITA remains an armed movement.

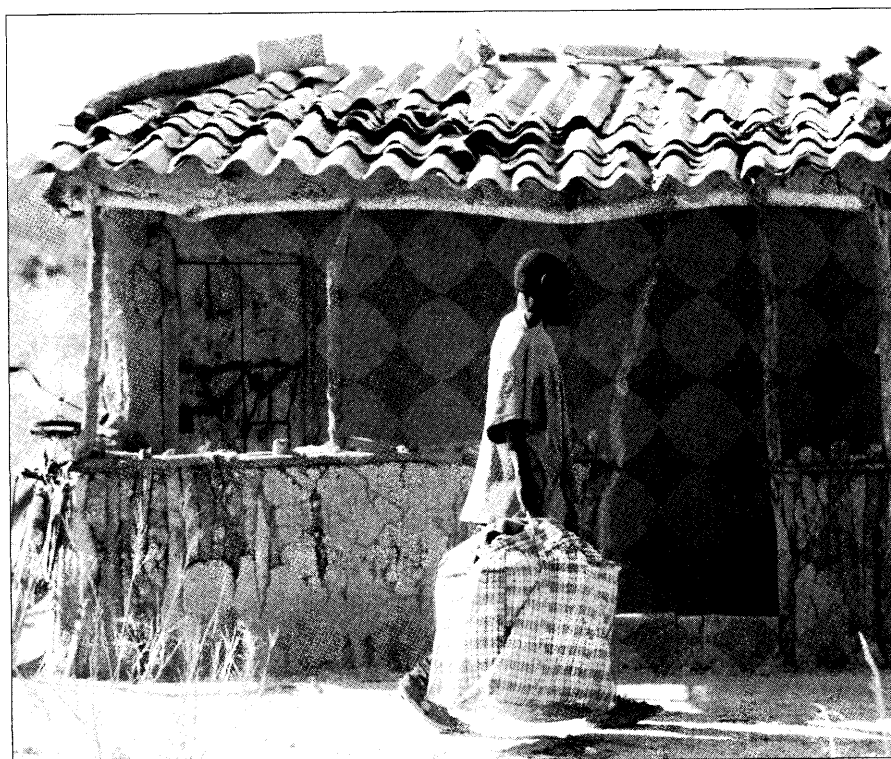
The UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, in a series of reports to the Security Council, has focussed on UNITA's apparent unwillingness to move towards "its transformation into a purely political party [with] no more armed personnel or weapons under its control." On 13 March Annan was even sterner: "I do not believe that the international community is ready to accept con-

tinued procrastination," he warned, while deploring UNITA attacks on UN personnel and pushing for the complete withdrawal of UN military personnel by the end of July. Annan also emphasized that economically, as far as the UN is concerned, Angola is on its own: "as the long term security situation improves and the need for short term relief interventions diminishes," he wrote, "the United Nations system is focusing increasingly on ensuring a smooth transition ... to rehabilitation and development."

It is true that Angola remains potentially one of the wealthiest nations in Africa, with crude oil reserves, diamonds, a wide range of other mineral resources, energy potential, and untapped industrial and agricultural capacity. Official Angolan government statistics are notoriously unreliable and selective, and usually outdated, so it is always hard to assess economic realities accurately. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 1990s, the Angolan economy had begun to

show some signs of growth. When fighting began again after UNITA lost the September 1991 election, however, the external debt and the inflation rate soared into the realm of hyperinflation, to 1800 percent in 1993, while levels of production have remained low. But even in its present devastated state, Angola's GDP is the third largest in the southern African region, and growth for 1995 and 1996 has averaged close to ten percent, according to some sources. The London-based Economist Intelligence Unit has predicted continued high growth for 1998.

At present, the economy is grossly distorted by such factors as the increase in government spending necessitated by extending control into former UNITA areas. In the last quarter of 1997, inflation rose again, and the national currency's black market value dropped sharply. Unemployment is presently estimated at 45 percent, and nearly seventy percent of Angolans live below the poverty line.



Unita combatant arrives home after 18 months in UN demobilization camp

Joao Silva - PictureNET Africa

Oiling the works

The main foreign exchange earner in Angola continues to be oil. There are over fifteen foreign oil companies operating in Angola, including such giants as Chevron, Exxon, and Texaco. The country is the second largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa, providing around six percent of total US needs, with 780,000 barrels a day in 1997 and a projected 870,000 barrels a day in 1998, worth about \$4.5 billion per year. Oil exploration continues apace – SONANGOL was granted new prospecting rights in “Block 9” in Kwanza Sul, for instance, at the end of March. Crude oil accounts for 90 percent of exports, 80 percent of government revenue and over 40 percent of the GDP, although little of this revenue has been available for development during the years of war.

In the agricultural sector, coffee was a major Angolan cash crop in colonial times and for some years afterwards, but the sector has now collapsed entirely. The government is optimistic that a “re-entry” into coffee production might be possible, based on state support for smallholder cooperatives, in a world market where prices are presently high.

Current government plans, meanwhile, are focussing on major infrastructural renovation, with the specific twin objectives of extending the electricity grid for the whole country, and getting the railway network running again. Angola is exceptionally well endowed with under-exploited hydroelectric potential, estimated in the 1980s at over 7,000 megawatts. Luanda has budgeted \$200 million for the repair of major dams during 1998 – only half of the country’s six major dams are still providing any hydroelectric power at all. The remaining three are the Lomaum dam on the Carumbela river, between Benguela and Huambo, which was destroyed by UNITA in 1984; the Mabubas dam, the oldest in Angola, on the Dande river outside Caxito, destroyed in

1992; and the Gove dam on the Cunene south of Huambo, which has been out of action since the late 1980s.

Troubled future

The one and a half million people crowded into Luanda’s crumbling slums celebrated in a minor key earlier this year the 422nd anniversary of the founding of the oldest city in southern Africa. Four centuries after the arrival of Paulo Dias de Novais in 1575, this wealthy and powerful country, populated by displaced, war-disabled and poverty-stricken people, continues to face a deeply troubled future. The behaviour of Jonas Savimbi and the threat to peace represented by his UNITA movement remain the central problem of Angolan politics, as they have for the last two decades. The apparently endless peace process, and the cost to the international community of maintaining a United Nations presence in the country have locked Angola into a time warp. As other nations in the region put the problems of the 1970s and 1980s behind them, to varying degrees, and struggle to cope with the post-modern world, Angola’s main political problem remains one with roots in a different political epoch.

Angola’s immediate economic future will remain bleak even if Savimbi abandons his lifelong and compulsive habits of stalling and renegeing on solemn agreements. Burdened by foreign debt, facing the virtual destruction of the social and economic infrastructure, the Angolan government has little room for policy manoeuvre, and is hampered even more in the development of independent economic strategies by IMF- and World Bank-dictated liberalization policies. US companies, for example, were returning to Angola with a vengeance: in September 1997 Coca Cola announced plans to build a \$33 million bottling plant outside Luanda, and sugar giant F. C. Schaffer has con-

ducted a \$350,000 feasibility study in Benguela province.

But beside the investment, the fact is that US and Western intervention in Angola has played a major role in sustaining the state of war in that country, even after massive and overt conservative support for Savimbi and UNITA stopped at the beginning of the decade. Savimbi is well aware that he can violate the Lusaka Protocol pretty much as he wishes without provoking the kind of intervention that might put an end to UNITA as a movement. The MPLA government’s radical agenda of social reform of the 1970s and early 1980s is now a dim memory, as the country’s economic policy is dictated by a combination of the IMF and World Bank liberalization programmes, and the domination of export earnings by Western oil companies. The economic independence which threatened US interests a decade ago has been rolled back. And yet it’s entirely possible that Jonas Savimbi and UNITA will continue to destabilize Angola for the foreseeable future.

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Here is tangible evidence of just how hard it is to put the cork back in the bottle once the genie of destabilization has been let loose upon a country. One more reason for Clinton not going to Angola? Amidst all the apologies – for the slave trade, for American Cold War support for dictatorships in Africa and for its failure to intervene in the Rwandan genocide – that dotted Clinton’s progress through Africa, nothing was said of the US role in sustaining a state of war in Angola by its direct and indirect support for UNITA throughout the 1970s and 1980s (to come no closer to the present). In all probability Clinton would not have mentioned these realities even had he touched down in Luanda. But certainly his planners spared him any temptation to do so.

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