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## Angola

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# Savimbi forces crush Soviet-backed drive

by Jeffrey Steinberg

The UNITA forces of Dr. Jonas Savimbi have delivered a strategic—and possibly decisive—military defeat to the Soviet- and Cuban-backed MPLA Army of Angola, according to eyewitness reports made available to *EIR*.

In what was labeled as the final offensive of this year's dry season, a force of approximately 18,000 MPLA troops, backed up by several battalions of Cuban armored units and Soviet- and East German-piloted air support units, launched an attack early this month against the town of Mavinga in southern Angola, inside territory controlled by UNITA, which has been fighting for a role in ruling Angola against the Soviet-directed dictatorship in Luanda.

For two years, Soviet military advisers have reportedly targeted Mavinga, 200 miles north of the UNITA capital city of Jamba. Mavinga is both a supply center for the UNITA forces and lies in the middle of the only large-scale agricultural area in UNITA territory.

Thus, an MPLA capture of Mavinga would have cut off the principal food basket for the UNITA forces, in addition to providing a staging point for a full-scale assault on Jamba during next year's dry season.

### Regular combat

What made this particular confrontation unique, according to our sources, is the fact that for the first time, UNITA forces engaged in regular combat against the attacking MPLA-Cuban-Soviet forces, rather than resorting to the traditional guerrilla warfare modes of engagement.

Thus, UNITA forces dug trenches and fortifications along a 45-mile front 55 miles northwest of Mavinga, along an arc stretching from the eastern end of the Lomba River to the town of Cuito Cuanaville to the east.

According to *EIR*'s regional sources, the Angolan army launched a three-pronged attack aimed at encircling the UNITA fortifications and accessing Mavinga to the south. This forced the Angolan MPLA forces to enter into thick jungles, leaving their tank and armored personnel carrier cover, largely Cuban-manned, in static positions along the main road south to Mavinga.

Once the MPLA forces had dispersed into the jungle, and attempted to turn the UNITA flank, portions of the UNITA

main defense force moved forward in a stealth jungle maneuver to cut off the MPLA supply lines from the rear. After several days of jungle trek, according to *EIR*'s sources, the MPLA forces discovered that their supply lines had been chopped off and began to shortly retreat in disarray, never even reaching the edge of the jungle in front of UNITA's front-line fortifications, which were constructed along a high ground of low hills and sparse vegetation.

At that point, according to eyewitness accounts, UNITA forces opened fire on the MPLA tanks, using U.S.-made TOW missiles and French-made Milan and latest model Apilas missiles. A reported 55 MPLA Soviet-made M-55 tanks and armored personnel carriers were knocked out.

At the point that the MPLA troops were routed through the supply cutoff, Soviet and East German piloted MiG-21s and MiG-23s, plus MI-8 and MI-24 HIND gunship helicopters were deployed to provide air cover for the Angolan retreat. At least five MiGs and five helicopters were taken out, according to battlefield reports, all through the UNITA forces' use of American-provided Stinger ground-to-air missiles. Dr. Savimbi, in statements issued following the rout of the MPLA invasion, placed great emphasis on the U.S.-provided Stingers, which denied the Angolan forces the ability to fly low-altitude reconnaissance and carpet bombing missions. The Stingers rendered the air cover and the tank mobile artillery impotent, a key factor in the entire military engagement.

While the last remaining MPLA units were still fleeing through the jungle, leaving their arms behind, on-site sources were already placing Angolan casualties at 1,750, with slight UNITA losses.

As the retreat was still ongoing, the first heavy rains began to fall, thus terminating any serious threat of MPLA attack until early next year.

### Implications of the victory

According to *EIR*'s sources, UNITA forces knocked out one SA-8 surface-to-air missile battery and seized two other complete batteries. It is believed that the MPLA intended to install these batteries at Mavinga to defeat anticipated Republic of South Africa air assaults in the event of a successful Angolan capture of the strategic city.

With morale running extremely high among Dr. Savimbi's forces, and with mounting demoralization of Cuban components of the Angolan forces, the preconditions have now been established for a potential political solution to the decade-long Angolan civil war. The fact that the UNITA forces so successfully routed the MPLA assault under regular—as opposed to guerrilla warfare—rules of engagement represents a qualitative victory for Dr. Savimbi and the most significant surrogate warfare defeats for Moscow in recent memory. All sides are now cautiously watching to see how the military victory translates into a new political configuration in the strategically placed African nation.