

JONATHAN STEELE reports from Cuamato in Angola on a South African raid across the frontier and below, **NICK DAVIES** talks to a mercenary who fought for the South Africans in bitter skirmishes north of the Namibian border.

The bloody trail that leads back to Pretoria

THE SMALL town of Cuamato lies about 25 miles north of the Namibian border, set in the typical countryside of this almost invisible war — a dense covering of scrubby trees, mostly little more than the height of a man but thick enough to provide good cover. In the rainy season, which lasts from now to April, a light sprinkling of grass emerges on the sandy soil. Cattle graze among the trees and in the occasional clearings marshbirds pick their way delicately across temporary pools and swamps which the sun, even in the heat of the day, never quite manages to dry out.

In the late afternoon two weeks ago the whirl of rotor blades burst in on a settlement just west of Cuamato. From the air the stockade and half a dozen thatched huts must have looked like one of many similar settlements in a vast sea of green trees stretching to the horizon. But successful South African intelligence had pinpointed a military camp around the stockade.

Churning up the powdery earth, six Puma helicopters machine-gunned the village and South African troops leapt to the ground in a blaze of firing.

Their work seems to have been brutally efficient. Visiting the camp a week later we saw the burned-out wrecks of seven lorries still close to their dugouts under charred branches, evidence that the defenders had been taken completely by surprise. Boys lay at the entrance to foxholes where several men died as they took an afternoon nap. On a metal plate beside cooking pots there were two peeled onions.

A convoy of 100 Angolan



Left, an Angola soldier and the wreckage of an Impala aircraft, with South African markings. Above, a deserted bunker at Cuamato

troops in two Land-Rovers and eight lorries, some of them equipped with anti-aircraft guns, drove us for over an hour through the bush to reach the site. Our escorts were taking no chances. At dawn two days after the attack reinforcements sent to the scene had been attacked by another team of eight South African helicopters.

The Angolans were cagey about what happened next. They claim to have shot down three helicopters and an Impala Mark II fighter bomber, but when we asked to see the wreckage they said the South Africans had successfully winched it out by helicopter as they normally try to do in order to deny

the Angolans a propaganda coup.

Finding out exactly how many people died in the attack was difficult. Fourteen soldiers and at least as many civilians, one officer told us. Another gave a lower figure. The relationship between the settlement — now a mass of ash around dozens of cooking pots — and the camp was never fully explained.

What was clear beyond doubt was that the camp was entirely Angolan.

Swapo teams cross the border into Namibia invariably on foot. The movement is not motorised to the same extent as the Angolan army and has no trucks so close to the border. Strewn around the camp, dusty and partly

burnt, we found handwritten letters and fragments of political pamphlets. Without exception the language was Portuguese, not English which is Swapo's lingua franca.

Fifteen minutes drive away they took us to the Roman Catholic mission of Cuamato, which was partly staffed by Irish missionaries until the fighting intensified two years ago. Two days after the attack on the settlement South African helicopter gunships swooped down and shot up the mission hospital without landing. By instinct all the patients had been evacuated the previous day after the attack on the nearby camp and only one person was wounded.

The Angolans say that South African forces operate regularly inside the country. For the last two months all civilian flights to Ngiva, the capital of Cunene Province have been suspended. Peasants are afraid to cultivate their fields and there are widespread food shortages in the entire border region.

Further to the north at Xanxongo (formerly Roodans) we saw the remains of the old bridge across the River Cunene which the South Africans blew up. Even further from the frontier 150 miles inside the country — the Angolans showed us where South African sappers had destroyed the struts holding the zigzag road which snakes down the

Serra de Lebs linking the town of Lubango with Mocimedes on the Atlantic coast. In no way could the highway be called a Swapo-related target. Elsewhere in Angola guerrillas of Unita, the South African-supported movement which was defeated in 1976 still make sporadic attacks. They depend on South African logistical aid.

From the evidence which is gradually accumulating it is clear that South Africa is conducting a systematic policy of striking economic and military targets in Angola. There can be no more doubt that the broad thrust of Angola's complaints that it is facing South African aggression is true, de-

policy he said. In the past, he alleged, South Africa went to great lengths to avoid contact with "host country troops" stressing via pamphlet drops that South Africa had no quarrel with Angolan civilians and soldiers, only with Swapo.

One of the many consequences of South Africa's attacks against Angola is that its figures of alleged Swapo losses of men and equipment are valueless. Unlike the Rhodesians whose communique mentioned civilians killed when "caught in cross-fire" — often a euphemism for men and women and children indiscriminately gunned down — the South Africans never admit that their attacks involve civilian deaths. This blurring of the distinction between civilian and military losses is compounded by the failure to distinguish between Swapo and Angolan casualties. What proportion of the 1,500 Swapo people South Africa says it killed last year were really Swapo military forces becomes impossible to know.

spite South African denials.

Officially South Africa only admits to occasional attacks within Angola. It says they are aimed exclusively at Swapo.

Recently the South Africans have begun to concede in their communique that they sometimes kill Angolans although they still claim that this happens during engagements against Swapo. On July 31 last year a reporter on the Cape Times who has close contacts with the military high command wrote that the lesson of South Africa's three week long incursion into Angola in June was that an Angolan camp no longer meant "automatic safety for Swapo."

This was a change of

On their side the Angolans were told recently by their President Eduardo Jose dos Santos that more than 3,000 Angolans, military and civilian, have been killed by South Africa over the last four years. Angola argues that South Africa's attacks have no conceivable justification. Angolan forces are not fighting either in Namibia nor in South Africa itself. True, Angola is giving aid and sanctuary to Swapo and will continue to do so, the Angolans say. But then South Africa maintains forces in Namibia, which it is occupying illegally, and keeps them supplied with conscripts and weapons from across the border in South Africa.