

Southern Africa: Pretoria plays for time

There is a glimmer of hope in southern Africa, but no more than that. The most realistic assessment of the present round of negotiations is that they represent Pretoria playing for time.

The good news is that both super-powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, are anxious for peace in the region. And both Angolan and South African military men realise that fighting in southern Angola has become too expensive in financial and human terms (AC Vol 29 No 7). The long-term outlook for Pretoria's white government is bleak: the black population is increasing all the time, key economic indicators are not good, Angolan military strength has increased, there will never again be a US administration as sympathetic as that of President Ronald Reagan.

So now might be a good moment for Pretoria to start settling outstanding accounts. The South African government is not, after all, a colonial administration which can just pull out. It and its voters must live with the consequences of their actions. They cannot afford to see the economy and the social fabric deteriorate too far. These factors have encouraged a rethink of South African strategy, led by senior officials at the foreign ministry.

Despite these encouraging signs, we believe South African strategists will do what they have done before: play for time. There is no sign that they are willing to grant independence to Namibia (AC Vol 29 No 9), an essential condition of peace. Military men think they are gradually winning the war against the South-West African People's Organisation (SWAPO). They would not take kindly to giving all that up, even to a thoroughly tamed SWAPO. They have not forgotten that their candidate, Bishop Abel Muzorewa, lost the 1980 elections in Zimbabwe, and they do not want to run that risk again. And although South Africa's failure to score a resounding military success in southern Angola has been a rude shock, the South African Defence Force is still the gendarme of southern Africa. Moreover white public opinion has not been prepared for any real concessions and would regard any shift on Namibia as a sell-out, leaving the field open to the far right.

So the talks held in London on 3-4 May and promised for Brazzaville on 12-13 May, while they are a step forward, do not promise a major breakthrough. No movement is likely on the big issues of withdrawing Cuban troops from Angola and giving independence to Namibia, although there will almost certainly be agreement on side-issues. There may well, for example, be an understanding to subdue the war in Angola to the point of having an unofficial

cease-fire for a few months. The Luanda government may, with Soviet approval, agree to expel the African National Congress (ANC) from its military training camps near Luanda, which would please the South African government greatly and enable it to tighten its squeeze on the ANC, as predicted (AC Vol 28 No 25).

Below is our check-list of current positions:

THE BIG POWERS

1. The US administration, due to be replaced at the end of 1988, is desperate for something to show for its policy of constructive engagement and the efforts of Dr Chester Crocker to get agreement on Angola and Namibia. The State Department is going flat out. They are telling people that a settlement is feasible in Angola and that, in the related question of Mozambique, the Mozambique Resistance Movement (RENAMO) is not worthy of international support. At the same time, the military and intelligence arms of the US government are engaged in a fierce struggle to wrest control of RENAMO and the *União Nacional Para Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA) from Pretoria in the belief that Pretoria will not agree to peace in Mozambique and Angola while it has these two on its side. The signs are that the next US Congress and the next president, whether Michael Dukakis or George Bush, will be less sympathetic to Pretoria than Ronald Reagan has been. In any event it will take the new administration at least a year to find its feet and be available for any serious bargaining on southern Africa.

2. The USSR, anxious for a global understanding with the USA and an easing of its commitments worldwide, is only slightly less anxious for peace. It is giving freedom to its Angolan ally to be flexible, and is attempting to reassure Pretoria that it does not believe a revolution in South Africa can come from outside. President Kenneth Kaunda believes the USSR would even accept independent black and white states in southern Africa. But rumours that the USSR will abandon Angola, by calling in its debts or refusing to supply weapons, appear unfounded. Mikhail Gorbachev, after his climb-down in Afghanistan, probably could not afford such a loss of prestige at home. Nor could the USSR, like the other super-powers, afford to settle without independence for Namibia, since that is the subject of a United Nations resolution which the USSR has promised to support, although it abstained from the actual vote. The USSR can probably afford to stay in a long game, knowing that its position improves with time. And it is not yet ready to play its trump card - its influence with the South African Communist Party, which dominates the ANC. When the time is right it can help deliver the ANC to a position agreed between Moscow, Washington, Pretoria and the frontline states.

THE REGIONAL ACTORS

1. Despite signs of a new approach, South African

security chiefs remain faithful to the total strategy they elaborated in the 1970s. Despite their setback - not defeat - in Angola, they want to maintain a wall of steel around South Africa by destabilising neighbouring countries and preventing cross-border infiltration. They would like the ANC to be expelled from its military training camps in Angola, which would put the ANC under enormous pressure to negotiate. Military chiefs in Pretoria, in private, are adamant that they will not give up support for RENAMO nor leave Namibia. Despite their failure to take Cuito Cuanavale (AC Vol 29 No 7), they are confident that they will never suffer a full-scale military defeat in Angola. But they must also be aware that the future does not look good. Future US administrations may impose tough sanctions against South Africa - which is one good reason why South Africa should now be seen to be talking. In the last resort, military men remain true to their belief that they must hold the line until South Africa's politicians have done a political deal with the black population at home. There is little sign of that as yet.

2. The Luanda government has a simple policy: talk with anyone but prepare for war. This line has improved relations with the USA. However Luanda's armed forces have defended Cuito Cuanavale at a heavy price. The Luanda government might be prepared to expel the ANC and even to negotiate with UNITA, although not with Jonas Savimbi who is greatly feared by Luanda politicians. They would find it hard to abandon SWAPO even if they wanted to, since they would lose control over SWAPO camps containing thousands of hardened fighters on their own doorstep. Nor would the USSR or Cuba permit Luanda to make so many concessions as to betray the whole cause.

3. UNITA is the greatest loser from the battles of the last year. It was not represented at talks in London. Parts of UNITA are disenchanted by Savimbi and would be tempted to negotiate peace with Luanda under US patronage.

4. SWAPO is suffering militarily both from the effectiveness of South African counter-insurgency and from its own commitment to fighting in central Angola, far from its natural habitat. However the movement can be confident, as Jonas Savimbi has pointed out, that it retains the affection of a majority of Namibians. As long as that is the case, it cannot be ignored.