

CONFLICT BETWEEN SOUTH AFRICA AND MOZAMBIQUE, 1975-1989, WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE COLD WAR AND REGIONAL TENSIONS¹

CJ Jacobs²

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1960, the clash of political wills between the South African government and movements³ such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) led to a protracted insurgency.⁴ The armed wings of two of the organisations, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and the Azanian's People's Liberation Army (APLA), tried to topple the government, but by 1965 the first insurgency had failed.

The main reasons for this were the will of the government to survive and the lack of political consciousness amongst the masses. This enabled the South African police to establish an extensive network of informants that curbed the freedom of action of the insurgents. A very important dimension was also that a buffer of states friendly to the South African government, whose armed forces and police intercepted the infiltrators before they reached South Africa proper, made it difficult to wage guerrilla warfare inside the country. The Portuguese were already fighting a counterinsurgency war against indigenous groups inside Angola and Mozambique, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was under white rule and South West Africa (SWA) was a United Nations Mandate Territory occupied by South Africa.⁵

2. REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE

Revolutionary warfare was the most prevalent form of conflict against colonial and minority governments during the Cold War era. The strategies of both the insurgents/revolutionaries and the government would thus focus on the population and the

¹ This paper was originally presented at the International Congress of Military History in August 2007.

² Resident Military Historian, South African National War College. E-mail: milhistjames@hotmail.com

³ Insurgency refers to a localised armed conflict between forces of a constituted government and other forces originating within the same national territory. The form may or may not be that of guerrilla warfare. If the conflict is internal but not localised, then it is a revolutionary war. E Luttwak, *A dictionary of modern war* (London, 1972), p. 116.

⁴ T Lodge, *Black politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg, 1983), p. 217.

⁵ F Toase, "The South African Army: the campaign in South West Africa/Namibia since 1966", *Armed forces and modern counter-insurgency* (London, 1985), pp. 194-198.

international community as manifested in different dimensions of the struggle. The insurgents would try to create alternative political and socio-economic structures in order to turn the population against the government.⁶ The struggle in the international arena constituted two subdimensions, the mobilisation of the international community to put the government under economic and political pressure and the support of neighbouring states for the insurgency.⁷

The insurgents' application of military power had to supplement the political and economic struggle. To achieve this they needed bases in neighbouring countries from where to infiltrate and to flee back to, to recuperate if pressed too hard by government forces. This was vital until such time that liberated areas could be established inside the country from where guerrilla warfare could be waged against government forces.⁸

3. THE WAR IN THE BUFFER STATES, 1965-1980

By 1974, the protracted war against Portuguese rule in its African territories slowed down economic growth and the steady increase in losses, negatively affecting the morale of the soldiers and the population of metropolitan Portugal.⁹ The final straw was a military coup in Lisbon in 1974 that started the process that would lead to the independence of the former colonies. Within one year, the Portuguese withdrawal from Angola and Mozambique overturned the strategic balance in southern Africa to the detriment of the South African government.¹⁰

In 1965, the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in Rhodesia led to a war with the nationalist movements in that country. While the Portuguese controlled Mozambique, the insurgents could only infiltrate via Zambia, where the difficult terrain of the Zambezi Valley made it easy for the government forces to detect and thwart the movement of guerrilla groups further into the country. The success of the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique's (FRELIMO) in escalating the insurgency in the Tete Province in Mozambique enabled the cadres of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) to activate the northeast theatre inside the former Rhodesia. This gained momentum when, from 1975, the FRELIMO government allowed these guerrillas to use its territory as a base area to escalate the insurgency. This was augmented by the larger infiltration by the cadres of Joshua

⁶ Lodge, pp. 71-74.

⁷ J Baylis, "Revolutionary warfare", *An introduction to strategy* (London, 1975), pp. 135-136.

⁸ CM Beer, *On revolutionary war* (Bromley, 1990), pp. 46-48.

⁹ I Beckett, "Portuguese Africa", *War in Peace* (London, 1981), p. 153.

¹⁰ AJ Venter, "Why Portugal lost its African wars" in *Challenge Southern Africa within the African revolutionary context* (Gibraltar, 1989), p. 234.

Nkomi's Zimbabwe Peoples' Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) from Zambia, with the Rhodesian armed forces and police stretched to the utmost limits of their ability.¹¹

In South West Africa (SWA) (now Namibia) the South West Africa Peoples' Organisation (SWAPO) since 1965 waged an armed struggle against the South African government's occupation of this country. However, its military wing, the Peoples' Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) could until 1975 only infiltrate from Zambia because of the Portuguese presence in Angola. The collapse of the Portuguese Empire in Africa enabled PLAN to activate the whole length of the border with Angola, forcing the South African Defence Force (SADF) to expand its counterinsurgency activities. From an insurgency point of view, this held the further advantage that the Ovambo people, SWAPO's main base of support, lived on both sides of the international boundary. Furthermore, the terrain and weather favoured the insurgents, especially during the rainy season when the bush made the detection of movement difficult.¹²

Events in Angola led to the closer involvement of the two leading powers in the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union in the region. However, it also provided the SADF with opportunities to influence events. In 1975, civil war broke out between the three main liberation movements that fought against the Portuguese. They were the Soviet and Cuban-backed Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) under Agostino Neto and the Chinese and later US-backed Frente de Libertação de Angola (FNLA) under Holden Roberto and Jonas Savimbi's União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA).

The civil war led to the involvement of South African forces on the side of UNITA, but in spite of initial military successes, the SADF and UNITA had to withdraw within sight of the capital Luanda, due to a lack of support from the West and some African countries. Soviet and Cuban involvement became more intense and the South African withdrawal from Angola restored PLAN's initial strategic advantage. Thus, the insurgency in SWA/Namibia intensified as the MPLA's armed force, FAPLA, supported PLAN in its campaign against the South African forces. Closer military co-operation with UNITA therefore became a strategic necessity from a South African government point of view.¹³

With regard to the eastern border, the expectation was that the close economic ties between South Africa and Mozambique would cause the FRELIMO government to refrain from supporting insurgency in South Africa. The war in Angola had virtually destroyed the South African government's previous diplomatic efforts to make inroads

¹¹ JK Cilliers, *Counter-insurgency in Rhodesia* (London, 1985), pp. 7-11.

¹² WS Barnard, "Die geografie van 'n rewolusionêre oorlog: SWAPO in Suidwes-Afrika", *S.A. Geographer* 10(2), 1982, pp. 162, 166.

¹³ SL Barnard, "'n Historiese oorsig van die gewapende konflik op die noordgrens van SWA/Namibië, 1966-1989", *Acta Academica* 23(1), 1991, pp. 115-116.

in Africa, but after initial radical rhetoric, public statements by key government figures created the impression that Mozambique wanted closer co-operation.¹⁴

However, early in 1975, the rhetoric changed.¹⁵ The FRELIMO leadership in so many words pledged their support for the armed struggle against the South African government.¹⁶ Of the buffer states lost to South Africa from 1975 to 1980, the take-over by the self-declared Marxist government of FRELIMO was the most detrimental from the South African government's point of view. With its long coastline of 2 500 km and good harbours such as Beira and Maputo, foreign maritime powers such as the Soviet Union and Cuba, could further upset the balance of power in the region. This could be done in a short time span by supplying the Mozambique armed forces with main equipment and military advisors, as had happened in Angola. The southern part of the country, with Maputo harbour, was also geographically the closest area from where the Frontline States could deploy conventional forces to threaten the industrial heartland of South Africa, the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging (PWV) (now Gauteng) complex. It is also relatively close to the Durban-Pinetown industrial area.¹⁷

Furthermore, Mozambique's location posed a threat in terms of the escalation of the insurgency in Rhodesia, as indeed occurred between 1975 and 1979, and the reactivation of the internal front in South Africa itself. In the border region, the bushveld type vegetation would retard the detection of groups infiltrating into South Africa and the straddling of the international boundaries by different ethnic groups would enable insurgents to mix easily with the local population before the government forces could detect them. This could develop into rural insurgency and the proximity of the PWV and Durban-Pinetown industrial areas held the potential of activating urban insurrection.¹⁸

Military intelligence reports also indicated that in the period 1975 to July 1977 the Soviet Union and its allies delivered military equipment to the value of R400 million to Mozambique. More and more Soviet, East German and Cuban instructors and technical personnel became involved in the training of the Mozambique armed forces (FAM) and the maintenance of their equipment. The demonstrated ability of the Soviet Union to re-supply their clients with an air bridge during the Yom Kuppur War in 1973 and the Marxist government in Ethiopia during 1977 also had to be taken into account. Having Yemen and Ethiopia as client states, it provided

¹⁴ B Fourie, *Brandpunte. Agter die skerms met Suid-Afrika se bekendste diplomaat* (Cape Town, 1991), p. 189.

¹⁵ Zambia, Botswana, and later Mozambique, Angola and Tanzania that regarded themselves as in the frontline of the struggle against colonialism and white minority rule in southern Africa.

¹⁶ HJ van Aswegen and G Verhoef, *Die Geskiedenis van Mosambiek* (Durban, 1982), p. 152.

¹⁷ J Keegan and A Wheatcroft, *The World Strategic Atlas* (London, 1986), pp. 63-64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

the Soviets the opportunity to use such an air bridge to alter the force levels in Mozambique in a short time to the disadvantage of South Africa.¹⁹

The most immediate threat to the South African government, however, was the reactivation of the insurgency in South Africa itself. In 1975 the ANC established a political office in Maputo to serve as a reception centre for people that fled South Africa. At the same time MK cadres moved from Tanzania and it was suspected that they used FAM facilities *en route* to South Africa.²⁰

In November 1976, the first MK cadres infiltrated from Mozambique via Swaziland into South Africa. During the following two years the feared reactivation and drastic escalation of the insurgency in South Africa followed. As a result of the Soweto riots during that year, thousands of young blacks left the country and joined the ranks of MK and APLA, thus creating an even more favourable revolutionary climate.²¹

During 1976 and 1977, most of the infiltration of MK cadres occurred via the Mozambique-Swaziland route.²² Also, the first indications of MK recruits being trained in Mozambique raised the spectrum of a repetition of an escalated insurgency in South Africa that would even surpass the situation in Rhodesia where the government forces were struggling to prevent a military collapse.²³ From 1975 to 1976, a small group of APLA guerrillas co-operated with members of the Mgomzulu tribe, a community straddling the South African-Swazi border. The South African Police crushed this, but the PAC succeeded in re-establishing underground structures in Johannesburg and East London.²⁴

4. THE SOWETO RIOTS AND ITS IMPACT, 1976-1977

While the struggle against the buffer states escalated, international events also worked in favour of the revolutionary movements in southern Africa. In 1973, the oil crisis in the Middle East weakened the South African economy that led to dissatisfaction amongst the black population that experienced the consequent negative impact of these events the most, while they realised that the war in South Africa's neighbouring states was escalating. In 1974, the gold price increased and the South African economy recuperated, but during the next year, a drastic decline

¹⁹ Personal interview with General CL Viljoen, former Chief of the SADF, Pretoria, 20 May 1994.

²⁰ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, former Director Military Strategy, Chief of Staff Operations Division, SADF, Pretoria, 30 August 1990.

²¹ H Barrell, *MK, the ANC's armed struggle* (London, 1994), pp. 36-37.

²² C Williamson, "ANC clandestine operations" in *Challenge Southern Africa within the African revolutionary context* (Gibraltar, 1989), p. 281.

²³ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, 30 August 1990.

²⁴ T Lodge, "Soldiers of the storm: A profile of the Azanian People's Liberation Army" in *About turn* (Institute for Defence Policy, Halfway House, 1995), p. 106.

caused the economic growth rate to decrease from 8,3% to 1,3% within a year and in 1977, the growth rate was nil.²⁵

The sudden decrease in economic growth caused a phenomenon known as the J-Curve, a situation creating expectations that are suddenly frustrated. This emphasised the difference in income between the population groups and with the escalation of the conflicts in South West Africa and Rhodesia, the revolutionary climate in South Africa rose accordingly.²⁶

In contrast to the situation from 1960-1965, the black population in the cities was ripe for insurrection. The government's stance that only the homelands should serve to channel the political and economic aspirations of the black population had failed. In spite of draconian measures to prevent it, urbanisation continued apace, but because blacks were regarded as temporary residents, they were not allowed to own property, which had many negative socio-economic implications. Furthermore, the withdrawal of the Portuguese from Africa and the success of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA created political expectations. In June 1976, when black pupils in Soweto started protesting against inequality in educational systems and the compulsory use of Afrikaans as the medium of tuition, the police opened fire and killed several. Unrest spread throughout the country and thousands of youths left South Africa and swelled the ranks of MK and APLA.²⁷

5. THE REFORMULATION OF DEFENCE POLICY

The need for a more aggressive defence posture was already prevalent by the end of 1976. The White Paper on Defence of 1977 identified the enemy of South Africa as International Communism under the leadership of the Soviet Union that wanted, from a South African government point of view, to instigate the so-called liberation movements like the ANC and PAC to wage war against the country. The aim was identified as the overthrow of the current state dispensation and the establishment of a Marxist peoples' republic along the lines of countries such as East Germany and Cuba. This would also coincide with the ideals of Pan Africanism that wanted black people to control all the countries on the continent south of the Sahara.

This grand strategy was identified as a "Total Onslaught" in which the insurgents would try to undermine all the power bases of the state in order to overthrow state authority within the framework of revolutionary warfare. According to the government, the only viable course of action to counter this was a so-called "Total Strategy" that had to protect the power bases of the state.

²⁵ J Barber and J Barrett, *South Africa's foreign policy, The search for status and security, 1945-1988* (London, 1990), pp. 177-178.

²⁶ RJ Greyling, *Terrorisme* (Pretoria, 1985), p. 60.

²⁷ J Kane-Berman, *Soweto, black revolt, white reaction* (Johannesburg, 1978), pp. 106-107.

Political reform was to be one of the cornerstones of the new approach in an effort to address the grievances of the population. This was linked to draconian internal security measures such as the use of states of emergencies. The attitude, however, was that this would all be negated if the military dimension of the insurgency spiralled out of control, as in Rhodesia, destroying the legitimacy of the government and forcing the population to choose the side of the perceived winners, the revolutionary movements.²⁸

6. THE FORWARD DEFENCE STRATEGY

The foreign policy of the new premier, PW Botha, was to promote international co-operation between the countries in southern Africa within the framework of a constellation of states. Through this, he hoped to gain international recognition for the independent black homelands, such as the Transkei and economic integration of the region to offset the hostile attitude of the Frontline States towards South Africa. This would, however, have to be backed up by a defence strategy that had to prevent further escalations of conflict.²⁹

Until 1978, the regional strategy of the SADF was based on deterrence of conventional aggression through expanding South Africa's arms industry and creating a credible conventional force. This had to be supplemented by the curbing of insurrection through a counterinsurgency strategy within South Africa and SWA/Namibia. The SADF supplied limited aid in terms of personnel and equipment to the Rhodesian armed forces and UNITA in Angola. However, in the light of the changed security situation in southern Africa it was deemed that this had to be supplemented by a more aggressive intervention in neighbouring states that posed a threat to South Africa.³⁰

South Africa had to keep the Frontline States off balance by dominating the subcontinent up to the basin of the Congo River. Support to insurgent groups inside the Frontline States implied that attacks against the rail and road networks in these countries forced them to export and import through South African harbours. This had to ensure the establishment of governments in Rhodesia and SWA/Namibia that would not support insurgency against South Africa and to put pressure on Mozambique to also toe the line. This would also be supplemented by external attacks by the SADF against insurgents in neighbouring countries and against conventional forces if military confrontation proved to be inevitable.³¹ Thus, the military strategic concept was to destroy enemies before they could destabilise South Africa and the black homelands.

²⁸ Republic of South Africa, *White Paper on Defence*, 1977, pp. 4-8.

²⁹ PH Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 35-37.

³⁰ M Malan, *My lewe saam met die SA Weermag* (Pretoria, 2006), pp. 155-156.

³¹ PL Moorcroft, *African nemesis, war and revolution in southern Africa* (London, 1990), pp. 166-167.

7. CONFLICT WITH MOZAMBIQUE, 1978-1984

In 1978, the situation in the former Rhodesia created the impression that this strategy could be successfully implemented. An internal settlement between the Smith government and certain black leaders led to elections and the establishment of a government of national unity under Abel Muzorewa. It was hoped that numerous of the insurgents would support them and that, what was then Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, would be recognised by western countries.

Within the framework of the new strategy South African military aid to Zimbabwe-Rhodesia increased drastically. The Rhodesians attacked guerrilla bases in Zambia and Mozambique, leading to large losses of lives amongst the insurgents.³² Another facet of this approach was the establishment of an insurgent movement in Mozambique by the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) with help from the army. By 1979, the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RNM or RENAMO) cadres were conducting a guerrilla war in the central provinces of the country against the Mozambique FAM (Forças Armadas de Mozambique).³³

Events inside Mozambique created the ideal opportunity for the establishment of an external supported insurgency. FRELIMO's declared Marxist policies led to an exodus of white skilled workers, farmers and factory owners. Thus, by June 1975 the country not only lost most of its administrators and officials, but also managers, technicians, artisans and shopkeepers to the amount of 20 000.

In spite of this, Samora Machel set out to transform Mozambique into a Marxist state. Agriculture and the manufacturing sector were nationalised, central economic planning introduced and the government used draconian measures to enforce this. The government also targeted religious activities and even tribal structures in the rural areas. The result was widespread discontent and the creating of a fertile environment for RENAMO to grow.³⁴

The new strategy of the Zimbabwean-Rhodesian armed forces could, however, not stem the tide of the insurgency inside the country and western recognition did not materialise. South African and British intervention in 1979 led to the Lancaster House Agreement, elections in 1980 and the establishment of the Republic of Zimbabwe under the leadership of Robert Mugabe.³⁵ Another of the buffer states had been lost and the Zimbabwean border was now added to the area from which MK and APLA could infiltrate their cadres into South Africa. Furthermore, access

³² IFW Beckett, "The Rhodesian Army: Counter-insurgency, 1972-1979" in *Armed forces and modern counter-insurgency* (London, 1985), pp. 166-168, 178-179.

³³ D Martin and P Johnson, "Mozambique: To Nkomati and beyond" in *Destructive engagement. Southern Africa at war* (Harare, 1986), pp. 3-10.

³⁴ M Meredith, *The state of Africa, a history of fifty years of independence* (Cape Town, 2006), p. 312.

³⁵ P Moorcraft and P McLaughlin, *Dhimurenga - the war in Rhodesia, 1965-1980* (Johannesburg, 1982), p. 234.

via Zimbabwe could also lead to the activation of Botswana as a base area for the insurgents. Previously, the location of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and the Caprivi Strip in South West Africa made this difficult. Even worse, intelligence indicated that these events contributed substantially to an increase of support for the ANC amongst the black urban population in South Africa.³⁶

To aggravate matters the Soviet build-up of conventional forces in the Frontline States increased unabated, with the probable aim of deterring the SADF from conducting military operations against their armed forces and the insurgents. Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique also created the impression that they were prepared to support Marxist client states in the Third World to the hilt.³⁷

In spite of this, certain international trends favoured the South African government. In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became the Prime Minister of Britain and during the next year, Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States. Both were well known for their anti-Marxist points of view and preparedness to actively combat the spread of global Soviet influence. This would eventually entail American military support to insurgents in self-declared Marxist states. The South African government believed that, coupled to internal political reform, its external military actions would receive tacit support from the West.³⁸

The first component of the military strategy against Mozambique constituted operations by special and air forces against houses in Maputo used by MK as training and transfer facilities to infiltrate their cadres into South Africa.³⁹ During 1981, SADF Special Forces also conducted raids into Lesotho.⁴⁰ Close co-operation with the Swaziland Defence Force also led to the eventual expulsion of MK cadres from that country.⁴¹ However, the support to external insurgent movements in Frontline States produced the most spectacular military results. After the establishment of Zimbabwe, the SADF moved RENAMO to Phalaborwa, close to the South African border with Mozambique and started training their cadres and infiltrating them into Mozambique. From 1980-1983, the civil war in Mozambique escalated to the point that RENAMO conducted operations in all but one of the country's provinces and exploded bombs in Maputo and Beira. The FAM could only move in large formations in certain areas. The strategy seemed to work.⁴²

³⁶ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, 30 August 1990.

³⁷ Personal interview with General CL Viljoen, 20 May 1994.

³⁸ Barber and Barrett, pp. 274-276.

³⁹ Republic of South Africa, *White Paper on Defence, 1984*, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Barrell, pp. 48-49.

⁴¹ J Hanlon, *Beggar your neighbours, apartheid power in southern Africa* (London, 1986), p. 138.

⁴² Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, 30 August 1990.

8. THE INTERNAL FRONT, 1978-1984

The leadership of the ANC took note of the change in government strategy. From 1976 till 1979, several sabotage acts were carried out in South Africa, but it did not yet seriously challenge the government's power base. According to Barrell,⁴³ the ANC's focus was still too much on the military dimension of the struggle and this was only rectified after a visit to Vietnam in 1978 where the ANC leaders discovered that the most important aspect was the establishment of underground structures and the mobilisation of the masses. Their focus would also shift to the cities where the discontent amongst the black population was rapidly rising.

Henceforth MK's military actions would only serve to enhance this process and contribute to the raising of the morale of the insurgents. They realised that the South African government would never tolerate the use of military facilities in neighbouring countries. Barrell⁴⁴ claims that after 1979, MK military attacks such as the explosions at Sasol in 1980 and Koeberg in 1982, as well as the Church Street car bomb in Pretoria in 1983, highlighted MK's ability to conduct sabotage inside the country. However, the overwhelming reaction of the black population, as measured against the attendance of funerals of MK members killed by government forces and the support to protest actions, reflected the effect of the new strategy. In August 1983, the United Democratic Front (UDF) was established inside South Africa to act as a front organisation for the ANC to facilitate the mobilisation of the masses against all the power bases of the state.⁴⁵ By 1990, more than 800 organisations had joined forces with the UDF.⁴⁶

On the other hand, the leadership of the ANC realised that the establishment of liberated areas inside South Africa was still a far way off. In 1982, they decided to deploy a MK brigade inside Angola to fight against UNITA, probably to gain military experience in preparation for the future when a full-scale guerrilla war in support of the revolutionary struggle could be waged.⁴⁷

9. THE WESTERN FRONT, 1978-1984

In SWA/Namibia, the government declared its intention to co-operate with the United Nations in granting independence to the territory, Apartheid was scrapped and an own army, the South West Africa Territory Force (SWATF) consisting of all

⁴³ Barrell, pp. 36-38.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴⁶ Interview with former SADF intelligence officer who wanted to remain anonymous, Pretoria, 13 April 2007.

⁴⁷ S Ellis and T Sechaba, *Comrades against apartheid. The ANC and South African Communist Party in exile* (London, 1992), p. 131.

the population groups in the country, would bear the main burden of the military action. The aim now changed to an attempt to win enough time for other political parties to defeat SWAPO in an election.⁴⁸

In accordance with the Forward Defence Strategy, external attacks against PLAN bases, already clandestinely executed since 1976, rapidly increased. By 1984, the SADF maintained a semipermanent presence of light, mobile search-and-destroy teams up to 100 km inside Angola and aid to UNITA continued. Angola and Mozambique were feeling the pinch of the SADF strategy. However, international pressure against South Africa had escalated to the point where the government felt itself military secure enough to give diplomacy a chance.⁴⁹

10. THE JOINT MONITORING COMMISSION AND NKOMATI

After lengthy negotiations, the Lusaka Accord was struck between South Africa and the Angolan government. A joint monitoring commission consisting of members of the two defence forces had to determine if all SADF elements had withdrawn south of the border and if FAPLA and Cuban forces did not occupy this area. However, SWAPO exploited the situation to escalate the conflict and the FAPLA and Cuban forces reinforced their conventional force capability. Thus, South Africa withdrew from the commission.⁵⁰

In Mozambique, the Forward Defence Strategy's results became even more spectacular. RENAMO had by March 1984 activated all the provinces in Mozambique and the SADF Chief of Staff Intelligence Division reckoned that they would be able to wrest political power from FRELIMO by 1985.⁵¹

Certain media in the Western World, however, used South Africa's destabilisation of the subcontinent to tarnish the name of the South African government, and in so doing, contributed even more to the international isolation of the country. The argument was that South Africa's regional actions had become an embarrassment to the Reagan administration.⁵² At the same time, South African efforts to promote RENAMO as a viable alternative to FRELIMO in the West met with only limited success.⁵³

Thus, the decision was made to try and find a diplomatic accommodation with the FRELIMO government. How the South African government hoped to achieve its strategic objectives in this regard is not clear. The SADF worked on the premise that the aim was to enable RENAMO to take over the power in the

⁴⁸ L. Scholtz, "The Namibian Border War: An appraisal of the South African strategy", *Scientia Militaria* 34(1), 2006, p. 33.

⁴⁹ Barnard, p. 120.

⁵⁰ HR Heitman and WA Dörning, "The Joint Monitoring Commission", *Militaria* 18(1), 1988, pp. 3-5.

⁵¹ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, 30 August, 1990.

⁵² *The New York Times*, 25 January 1983.

⁵³ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, 30 August, 1990.

country by 1985.⁵⁴ However, an alternative was apparently decided upon, namely to maintain support for RENAMO at a level carefully calculated to keep it too weak to overthrow FRELIMO but strong enough to keep it and the whole country unstable and incapable of threatening South African interests.⁵⁵ Another dimension of this was possibly to waken FRELIMO's support to the ANC and PAC and to enforce regional dependence on South Africa's extensive transportation system.⁵⁶

Mozambique's president, Samora Machel, realised that the Soviet Union would not be able to come to the rescue of his government in a conflict with South Africa. It also became clear that the United States did not want to overthrow the governments of Angola and Mozambique, but was using UNITA and RENAMO respectively to move them away from Marxism towards democratic and free market dispensations.⁵⁷ Since 1981 the Mozambique government liased with the United States, which had the clear message that MK did not have the capacity to escalate the war in South Africa to a full-scale guerrilla war and as long as the Frontline States supported insurgency against South Africa, they should not expect help from the West.⁵⁸

The N'Komati Accord between South Africa and Mozambique was signed on 16 March 1984. In exchange for Mozambique's undertaking to cease support to MK, South Africa agreed to halt its support to RENAMO.⁵⁹ This was a serious setback for the ANC as it was also revealed that Swaziland had a secret agreement with the South African government to act against MK in its territory. The result was that MK cadres had to deploy hastily into South Africa and there was a sudden rise in casualties inflicted by the SADF and the Police. In spite of maintaining armed activity for a short time in South Africa after that, the outbreak of a new wave of protest in September 1984 could not be supplemented with a full-scale guerrilla campaign, due to the loss of military facilities in Swaziland and Mozambique. At the same time infiltration routes through Zimbabwe and Botswana had not been developed. To aggravate matters, dissatisfaction with the circumstances in which MK members had to fight in Angola led to mutiny in some MK camps.⁶⁰

In a secret meeting between PW Botha and Samora Machel it was agreed that South Africa would continue to provide non-military aid such as agricultural

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ G L'Ange, "Countries in the cross-fire" in *Challenge. Southern Africa within the African revolutionary context* (Gibraltar, 1989), p. 337.

⁵⁶ A Malache, P Macaringue and J Borges Coelho, "Profound transformations and regional conflagrations: The history of Mozambique's armed forces from 1975-2005", *Evolution and revolutions. A contemporary history of militaries in southern Africa* (Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, 2005), p. 171.

⁵⁷ CA Crocker, *High noon in southern Africa, making peace in a rough neighbourhood* (Johannesburg, 1992), p. 243.

⁵⁸ N Macqueen, "Mozambique's widening foreign policy", *The World Today* 40(1), January 1984, pp. 23-26.

⁵⁹ Fourie, p. 198.

⁶⁰ Barrell, pp. 53-54.

implements, seed and medical support to RENAMO. This could then be used to facilitate negotiations between RENAMO and the FRELIMO government, with the aim of creating a government of national unity.⁶¹

11. THE FINAL PHASE, 1985-1989

In spite of the diplomatic setback of the failure of the Joint Monitoring Commission to end the wars in Angola and SWA/Namibia, on face value it appeared that the Forward Defence Strategy allowed the South African state to survive. It was, however, soon to prove that appearances were misleading.

The nature of the war on the western front changed. Although counterinsurgency against PLAN continued, the SADF's main focus became support to UNITA, after FAPLA, the Cubans and SWAPO had started building up forces to destroy Savimbi's hold on southeast Angola. During 1985 and 1986, FAPLA launched military offensives against UNITA, which were beaten off by a limited SADF presence.⁶² It seemed as if South Africa was winning the military side of the conflict in SWA/Namibia.⁶³ UNITA's guerrilla war against FAPLA enabled the SADF to limit the insurgency into Ovamboland and PLAN's losses increased dramatically.⁶⁴

In January 1986, Major General Justin Lekhanya led a military *coup d'état* in Lesotho. He favoured closer relations with South Africa and it led to the deportation of ANC members and specifically MK operatives. As MK had used Lesotho to infiltrate into the Eastern and Western Cape, the Transkei and to a limited extent, the PWV area, this was a serious blow.⁶⁵

Strategic realities however, proved the above to be only temporary gains. In 1985, Keegan and Wheatcroft⁶⁶ warned that the position of the South African government was vulnerable, as the following four years would demonstrate. According to them, the war in Angola and SWA/Namibia had become a drain on the South African economy. They saw part of the solution as a disengagement from this war, as it would ease international pressure and burden South Africa's enemies with the logistic problem of fighting a war with long lines of communication. A glance at the map of southern Africa indicates that after the creation of Zimbabwe in 1980, SWA/Namibia lost its value as a buffer zone. The argument that a SWAPO government in Windhoek would allow infiltration into the Northwest Cape and via Botswana does not take into account the fact that infiltration through the latter

⁶¹ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, 30 August, 1990.

⁶² Barnard, p. 122.

⁶³ Toase, p. 216.

⁶⁴ Scholtz, "The Namibian Border War...", p. 39.

⁶⁵ T Motumi, "The Spear of the Nation - The recent history of Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK)" in *About Turn* (Institute for Defence Policy, Halfway House, 1995), p. 99.

⁶⁶ Keegan and Wheatcroft, p. 71.

could from then on anyway proceed via Zimbabwe. Also, the semidesert nature of the border with Namibia and its resultant lack of large population concentrations in that area defeats the argument that SWA/Namibia, as a strategic buffer, was still vital for national survival. Also, according to L'Ange,⁶⁷ by 1988 it was obvious that SWAPO was winning the contest for the loyalty of the population, as they had the political support amongst most black Namibians, especially the numerically strong Ovambo tribe.

In the east, the N'Komati Accord had only provided temporary gains as regional developments further isolated the South African government. The decision to give diplomacy a chance was taken on the basis that South Africa could not conduct a war on two fronts. As the winning of the war against SWAPO was considered a priority, the possibility of a RENAMO victory in Mozambique was sacrificed. They had hoped to gain stability and prosperity through the accord.⁶⁸

The problem was that the efforts to facilitate the negotiations between FRELIMO and RENAMO had failed. Also, by the signing of the N'komati Accord, the South African government had for the first time officially acknowledged its support to RENAMO. The civil war escalated and, in desperation, Machel used the continued limited aid to RENAMO to accuse South Africa of breaking the accord. This was aggravated by the confiscation of RENAMO documents in the Gorongosa area of Mozambique in 1985, which the Mozambique government claimed indicated secret dealings with the SADF and Machel's death in a plane crash on 19 October 1986. Mozambique, the Soviet Union and the Western media created the impression that the South African government was responsible for the accident and used the accusations of continued support to RENAMO to depict South Africa as the regional bully.⁶⁹

Thus, the perceptions discussed earlier, that South Africa used RENAMO to weaken Mozambique and enlarge its dependence was strengthened. This neutralised the temporary diplomatic advantage gained by South Africa and during 1985, MK and APLA had again started using Mozambique as an infiltration route.⁷⁰ The Mozambique government had clearly outmanoeuvred its South African counterpart within the diplomatic dimension of the war.

The war in Angola escalated as FAPLA, supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba, launched large-scale offensives against UNITA. The South African contribution had to increase accordingly. The SADF/UNITA forces achieved spectacular success on the Lomba River in 1987, but then got bogged down in a war of attrition near Quito Quanevale. Ultimately the South African withdrawal, the implementation

⁶⁷ L'Ange, p. 346.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 337; Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, 30 August, 1990.

⁶⁹ Moorcraft, p. 177.

⁷⁰ R Kasrils, *Armed and dangerous, my undercover struggle against apartheid* (Oxford, 1993), p. 244.

of UN Resolution 435 and the independence of Namibia established the situation recommended by Keegan and Wheatcroft, but only in 1989, four years later.⁷¹

The South African government also did not escape unscathed from this conflict. They, and the SADF, never understood the importance of propaganda in war. The events at Quito Quanevale were used to create the impression that the SADF was defeated and that South African diplomats negotiated from a position of weakness.⁷² The effect of this on the election in SWA/Namibia and SWAPO's subsequent victory are aspects that will have to be examined by historians. Thus, by 1989 this buffer was also lost.

In 1985, Keegan and Wheatcroft⁷³ also warned that the government's internal policies were not working and alternatives would have to be found in a short space of time. Since 1983, the UDF synchronised a coalition of anti-apartheid organisations that included labour movements, educational, youth, civic, women's, religious, and political organisations in mass actions against the government. The government's efforts to placate black political and economic aspirations through the homelands, local government participation in the urban areas and the Tricameral Parliament again aggravated rather than defused the situation. In September 1984, large-scale mass protests started in the urban areas that even spread to certain rural regions. MK and APLA membership increased drastically and some authors reckon that the country was on the verge of full-scale civil war.⁷⁴

Hough⁷⁵ is, however, of the opinion that by 1988 the ANC had to admit setbacks in their attempts to transform unrest into insurrection. The government's countermeasures, such as states of emergency and in certain cases addressing the immediate causes of discontent, stemmed the tide. MK and APLA could not convert any area in South Africa into liberated areas, but the government could also only stay in power through emergency legislation and brute force. In addition, international pressure and sanctions further isolated the country. As Magyar rightfully concluded in 1989: "Even an expansionist state cannot conquer with a contracting economy."⁷⁶ Thus, the stage was set for the dramatic events of 1990 that would resolve the conflict.

⁷¹ G Mills and D Williams, *7 Battles that shaped South Africa* (Cape Town, 2006), pp. 186-187.

⁷² GC Kwhela, "Umkhonto Wesizwe's contributions to the defence of the African revolution in Angola", *Journal for Contemporary History* 28(2), 2003, p. 117; L Scholtz, "Cuitio Cuanavale: Wie het werklik gewen?", *Scientia Militaria* 28(1), 1998, p. 51.

⁷³ Keegan and Wheatcroft, p. 71.

⁷⁴ Barrell, pp. 70-72; Motumi, p. 87.

⁷⁵ M Hough, "Revolt in the townships" in *Southern Africa within the African revolutionary context* (Gibraltar, 1989), pp. 406-408.

⁷⁶ KP Magyar, "Low-intensity conflicts: The African context" in *Responding to low-intensity conflict challenges* (Washington, 1990), p. 242.

12. EVALUATION

The main lesson learnt from the Rhodesian Bush War was that if the government forces lost the military struggle, negotiations would have to be done from a position of weakness. Military strategy therefore had to win time for the South African government by preventing an escalation of the conflict in South Africa into a full-scale people's war. In order to achieve this, it was imperative to prevent the insurgents from using neighbouring states and eventually liberated areas in the country from where to conduct guerrilla warfare.

The time gained between 1960 and 1975 were not exploited and the loss of Angola and Mozambique as buffer states to the revolutionary onslaught contributed substantially to the Soweto riots that was in itself an indication of the bankruptcy of the government's internal policies.

From 1976 to 1979, the Forward Defence Strategy furnished the government with time to find answers to the internal problems of the country, but the loss of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and the escalation of the conflict in Angola and SWA/ Namibia were serious blows, which called for an even more aggressive posture. From 1980 to 1984, spectacular military results were achieved, but on the diplomatic and economic fronts, the South African government could not win the war.

Mozambique provides the typical example of this problem. The South African government could not allow the Rhodesian scenario to repeat itself in South Africa and Mozambique's support to MK and APLA created circumstances by which the insurgency inside South Africa could escalate beyond control. This would provide the ideal situation for the Soviet Union and Cuba to get involved in the protection of Mozambique, thus being able to deploy large military forces close to the South African economic heartland.

The SADF raids and especially the support to RENAMO temporarily neutralised this threat, but by 1984 diplomatic isolation enticed the South African government to opt for a diplomatic solution in Mozambique, while at the same time trying to win the war in SWA/Namibia. Given the strategic problems with the large-scale Soviet and Cuban involvement and the logistic problem of conducting a war over long lines of communication up to the south of Angola, it would have made more strategic sense to extract from SWA/Namibia and regard Mozambique as being strategically more important. After all, its geostrategic position implied that it had the largest potential of all the Frontline States to destabilise South Africa through revolutionary or conventional warfare.

The diplomatic option of 1984 eventually failed as the civil war in Mozambique continued unabated and the perception was globally created that South Africa deliberately destabilised its neighbour. A RENAMO government, with its large base of support amongst the population and with South African economic aid stood a better

chance of political and economic success, than a destabilised FRELIMO. It also had the potential of completely neutralising the insurgency threat from Mozambique.

The government again failed to capitalise on the security umbrella to find an answer to the most pressing political question, the design of a constitutional system that would address the aspirations of the majority of the people in the country. Thus, the ruling élite found themselves overtaken by world events such as the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the mounting support for the ANC in the Western World.

This was aggravated by the inability to find a way out of the conflict in SWA/Namibia and Angola. The result was that the SADF was dragged further into a war of attrition that could not be won, while time and money that could have been used in the struggle against the ANC and PAC inside South Africa were wasted.⁷⁷

After 1980, the only positive result of the continued war on the western front from a South African government point of view was that MK had to vacate their training bases in Angola and move to Tanzania and Uganda, in accordance with the final agreement between the warring parties.⁷⁸ This was to UNITA's advantage but it is debatable whether it had much influence on the war inside South Africa itself.

In a revolutionary war, the military dimensions can only achieve limited success. By 1989, the government was losing the war on all fronts, except for its military power in comparison with the Frontline States and the revolutionary movements. The end of the Cold War, however, created the circumstances for a new political strategy that would not have been possible had the government also lost the military dimension of the conflict.

⁷⁷ Official figures on the cost of the war over a time of 23 years is R2m per day on average. *Defence Diary, 1985*, p. 19. Only the ammunition used during the 1987/88 financial year entailed R328m. W Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War* (Gibraltar, 1989), p. 158.

⁷⁸ Kwhela, p. 122.