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Cuba on move across Africa

Reports that Cuba is planning to withdraw a large part of its 10,500-man expeditionary force from Ethiopia comes as bad news for the West.

These Cuban troops were sent to aid Ethiopia during its 1977 border war against neighboring Somalia. Backed by a massive airlift of Soviet arms and advisers, they routed the ill-armed, outnumbered Somalis who were fighting to regain their former province of Ogaden. Cuba's African Legion also performed the vital role of propping up the shaky Marxist regime of Ethiopia's brutal ruler, Lieut. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam.

After defeating Somalia, Mengistu used part of the Cuban forces in an effort to suppress the 20-year secessionist rebellion in Ethiopia's province of Eritrea. This action put the Cubans in a very embarrassing position.

Before the revolution that overthrew the dynasty of Emperor Haile Selassie, Ethiopia was a close ally of the United States. Russia and Cuba then armed and supported Ethiopia's traditional enemy, Somalia, and two Marxist rebel movements in Eritrea. But, when Mengistu came to power, Russia and Cuba, keenly aware of Ethiopia's great strategic importance, quickly jettisoned their erstwhile Somali and Eritrean clients and embraced Ethiopia.

Somalia then abandoned socialism and turned to Washington for aid. The more resolute Eritreans refused to abandon their Marxist ideals for mere money and soldiered on, fighting the Ethiopians, Cubans and Russians.

After years of desultory fighting, the Ethiopians and their communist allies have been unable to crush the Eritreans; they were even hard-pressed to hold on to Eritrea's strategic port of Asmara and the province's major cities.

Friends become foes

This inconclusive struggle also put the Cubans in the difficult position of shooting at the very same people who they had so recently championed as "fighters against imperialism" and who they considered as a genuine people's national liberation movement. Fidel Castro even spoke openly of this dilemma and finally secured Mengistu's agreement to withdraw Cuban troops from combat in Eritrea.

Now that the Somalia threat has been eliminated and the ruthless Mengistu regime is rid of its many internal and external foes, the East bloc reportedly believes that Cuban troops are no longer needed. This is bad news for the West since it means that the ardently pro-communist regime of Ethiopia is now firmly in place in East Africa's most important nation. The narrow mouth of the Red Sea, flanked by communist Ethiopia and South Yemen, and the Horn of Africa are under unquestioned Soviet control.

Worse yet, the two or three Cuban brigades in Ethiopia are being transferred to war-torn Angola, whose Marxist government is under growing assault from anti-communist rebels of UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) and South African forces.

Angola has become an important Russian air and naval base from where Soviet forces can monitor the south Atlantic and threaten the vital oil routes around the Cape of Good Hope. Some 4,000 Russians and East Germans are also using Angola as a staging base for SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization) guerrillas raiding into South-African controlled Namibia.

Soviet control of Angola is assured by a garrison of 22,000 Cuban troops which serves to prevent South Africa from overthrowing the Luanda government. These Cubans also provide a defensive force against the growing power of the pro-Western UNITA rebels. Led by Jonas Savimbi, these fighters control more than a third of Angola and have recently been raiding within 100 miles of Luanda.

Raids into Angola

This month, South African forces staged deep raids into Angola against SWAPO guerrillas; in the process, they fought a number of sizable battles with Cuban, Russian and East German units. While the communist forces were tied down by the South African offensive, Savimbi's troops made significant advances into northern Angola in an attempt to open supply lines to Zaire.

Angola's communist rulers have reacted with great alarm to these co-ordinated attacks and it is clear that Cuban reinforcements from Ethiopia are designed to restore the military initiative to Luanda.

Since it appears certain that the new Cuban troops will be used against UNITA and to support SWAPO attacks on Namibia, South Africa may be tempted to stage a pre-emptive attack before these Cuban reinforcements arrive. Some South African sources even fear that the Cuban mechanized units may be used for a direct invasion of Namibia once the present rainy season is over.

Washington is feverishly trying to negotiate the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola in exchange for a non-communist, independent Namibia before this crisis blows up into a full-scale war. But many observers now believe that this troubled region may well become Africa's latest battleground between East and West.

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