

THE BATTLE OF THE TRUTH AND MARTIN BLANDINO'S BOOK Part I

The international press only reports on the economic hurricane beating the world. Many present it as a new phenomenon. For us it is not new; it was foreseeable. Today, I'd rather deal with another current issue of great interest to our people, too.

When I wrote the reflection on Cangamba, I was unaware of the excellent book written by the journalist and author whose name I have included in the title. I had only seen the film Kagamba, which brought to my mind such touching memories. One phrase kept coming to me: Those who fell in Cangamba did not die in vain!

The same purpose had inspired my message of August 12, 1983, addressed to the Chief of the Cuban Military Mission in Angola.

At dawn, the enemy had pulled out of the battle field. Its troops there exceeded the figure of 3,000 men armed and equipped by the South African racists. From August 2, they had been attacking day and night the trenches occupied by 600 Angolans of the 32nd FAPLA Brigade and 84 Cuban internationalists, plus a reinforcement of 102 men sent from the military region of Luena. Cubans and Angolans fought restlessly there with no food or water and having sustained 78 deadly casualties and 204 injured; of these 18 dead and 27 wounded were Cubans. When the attackers started to pull out they lost practically every weapon and ammunition and sustained a great number of casualties. The two best UNITA Brigades had been crushed.

The book by Jorge Martin Blandino was published in 2007, when due to my health condition I was not in the frontline. It was the result of a lengthy research and of talks with many comrades who were protagonists of the events, as well as the consultation of 34 books on the subject, some of them written by "South African officers from the days of apartheid" or people who were misled into becoming UNITA followers.

In one of the most interesting chapters it reads:

"That night, as the watch in Havana showed the time to be 14:00 hours and 19:00 hours in Luanda, communication was established again with the Cuban Military Mission in Angola. After the exchange on the telephone, a cable was immediately dispatched legally establishing the previously issued indications. They reaffirm the decision made, that is, to urgently evacuate every Cuban from Cangamba; to try to persuade the Angolans to do likewise; to keep up the exploration mission on the approaches to the village and to be mindful of the movement of the enemy's troops in the Moxico province.

"...In Luanda, at 9:00 hours, Cuban ambassador Puente Ferro and Colonel Amels Escalante, Chief of the General Staff at the Cuban Military Mission in Angola, show up for a meeting with President Jose Eduardo dos Santos. To their surprise, General Konstantin, head of the Soviet Military Mission, is also there. The Angolan Defense Minister and Colonel N'Dalu, Chief of FAPLA General Staff, arrive immediately afterwards.

"The ambassador is the first to walk into the offices of the President. He officially presents the message sent to Dos Santos by the Commander in Chief. Subsequently, Colonel Escalante comes in and explains in detail the assessment made by the top Cuban leadership of the military situation, which is the basis of the decision to evacuate the internationalists from Cangamba; also, the proposal to immediately do the same with the FAPLA combatants and to halt the ongoing operation in the Moxico province.

"The President says he agrees with Fidel and asks that General Konstantin be showed in. The head of the Soviet Military Mission asks for the floor to express a view that would amaze and upset the Cubans. He says that he finds the idea acceptable as a matter of policy but that as a military man he disagrees with halting the operation and adds that in his view the conditions exist to make the most of the success, for example, by bringing more forces to fight, including the landing and assault brigade which has just come in from Cuba.

"Colonel Amels Escalante reminds him of the many difficulties faced with the supplies in the hard days of the enemy attack on the village. The Soviet military resorts to the argument that recently an Il-76 aircraft had arrived carrying C-5 rockets, to which the Cuban responds by recalling that they had to be brought in from Cuba since they were not there at the time they were most needed. Given the way the meeting is going, Dos Santos chooses to adjourn and postpone the final decision.

"A few hours later, at noon, General Konstantin comes to the headquarters of the Cuban Military Mission. He apologizes for the way he had expressed his views at the meeting with the President and admits that he should have deeply studied the situation that had been created before offering such an opinion."

The historian's explanation is very clear. An embarrassing situation had already been created which was really serious for its implications any way you looked at it. Everything was at stake, therefore, the Cuban command had to be very firm and keep their sangfroid.

In the same book, and taking up different moments, the essence is explained:

"Colonel N'Dalu: There is no unity of thought and when there is a problem some have an idea and others...Much importance is given to the word 'sovereignty' but it's difficult to preserve such a large territory; we don't have enough troops. It's not only Cangamba. We are in many places just to say we are there but strategically speaking they are unimportant. The offensive can wait until later. We have had discussions at the General Staff, with the Defense Minister, and there is no agreement. That's why at a certain moment some decisions are delayed, and some people have to be persuaded because if a unit is withdrawn and anything happens the other say: 'It happened because the others asked for withdrawal'. Then if it stays and something happens: 'The culprits are those who said the troops had to stay.' Actually, we must defend the more densely populated areas, those of greater social and economic interest, and forget for a while the territories where UNITA's presence or ours does not tilt the scale. They say that they are in control but they are not really there; what they do know is that we are not there either."

The author reviews the MINFAR official documents:

"After a short period of meditation, the Commander in Chief issues instructions to transmit to the head of the Cuban Military Mission the following arguments. He wonders what sense it makes now to stay in Cangamba. It has been proved that the number of helicopters and combat and transportation planes in Angola, and their supplies, are insufficient to secure support for a large operation given the enormous distance between the village and the air basis. As life has shown, it's still more complex to secure the advance of reinforcement troops by land since these are also located hundreds of miles away and they would have to move through impassable roads infested with enemies. If the movement of the armored vehicles has been extraordinarily difficult in the dry season, we can hardly dream of such a great movement in the upcoming rainy season.

"A great success has been accomplished and it would not be rational to expect more at the moment...Think of the bitter days suffered during the siege and the danger of annihilation of the small group of internationalists and alert them on the necessity to be realistic and to avoid being driven by the euphoria that usually comes with the victory: 'We cannot allow the victory to be turned into a setback.'"

"The chief of the Cuban Military Mission shows his agreement and the immediate evacuation of the Cuban internationalists deployed in Cangamba is ordered. Right away, the Commander in Chief drafts a personal message addressed to Angolan President Jose Eduardo Dos Santos (the message challenged by General Kostantin) where, following the same rationale shared with Division General Cintra Frias, he raises the need for the FAPLA to also evacuate the villages of Cangamba and Tempue, and the compelling need to strengthen the defense of Luena, Lucusse and Kuito Bie. In light of the existing situation, he informs him of the decision to pull out every Cuban from Cangamba soon. He also suggests to postpone until the next dry season any offensive action in the region of Moxico and, for the time being, to concentrate all efforts in the struggle against the enemy in the vast territory separating the city of Luanda from the line defended by the Cuban internationalist troops to the south of the country, the area that UNITA considers its second strategic front.

"At the same time, Colonel Amels Escalante informs the chief of the FAPLA General Staff and the chief of the Soviet Military Mission in Angola, of the Commander in Chief's decision to halt the operation undertaken by the Cuban internationalist troops, in view of the difficulties with the deployment of columns, the problems with supplies --mostly for the aviation-- and the upcoming rainy season. Shortly afterwards, ambassador Puente Ferro and Colonel Escalante meet with the Defense Minister to offer him the same information."

Colonel Amels Escalante hoped that Colonel N'Dalu, chief of the FAPLA General Staff, would understand the need to withdraw from Cangamba.

The Angolan Army General Kundi Payhama, a combatant of exceptional merits, told the author: "There was brotherhood, there was fraternity and everything was done here in a different spirit. The love, friendship, sacrifices and devotion of the Cuban comrades who left here their sweat and their blood has no price. Let it be said that we are forever de facto brothers. Nothing in this world, nothing, can justify that anything gets in the way of friendship between Angola and Cuba."

We shall continue on Monday in Granma.

Fidel Castro Ruz

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