

[Speech by Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, President of the Republic of Cuba, at the ceremony commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Cuban Military Mission in Angola and the 49th anniversary of the landing of the 'Granma', Revolutionary Armed Forces Day, December 2, 2005 \[1\]](#)

Date:

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Distinguished guests

Internationalist combatants

Comrades

49 years ago today, the 'Granma' yacht arrived on the coast of our homeland. Thus today marks the beginning of the 50th year in the life of the Rebel Army and the Revolutionary Armed Forces.

As is well known, in the wake of the landing and despite early setbacks, the fight spread rapidly to every corner of our fields and towns. There was not a moment's truce until the resounding people's victory of 1st January 1959, in the fight to the death against the oppressors who tortured and murdered tens of thousands of Cubans and drained the nation's monetary reserves.

This magnificent triumph, however, would no be the end of the armed struggle.

For, imperialist treachery, aggravated by every measure of public benefit or which consolidated national independence, kept us constantly on guard. Many comrades had to continue risking their lives in defense of the Revolution, both in Cuba and abroad, in the fulfillment of sacred duties.

Exactly 19 years after the 'Granma' landing, in November 1976, a small group of Cubans in Angola fought the first combats in a battle that would last many years.

The history of imperialist and neocolonial plunder and pillage by Europe in Africa, backed to the hilt by the United States and NATO, as well as the heroic Cuban solidarity with its sister nations, have not been fully known, if only as well-deserved recognition for the hundreds of thousands of men and women who wrote that glorious page of history, which should be an eternal example to present and future generations. That is not to say it does not still need wider dissemination.

In recent days, the subject has also received much attention by television and the rest of the media, and at the ceremonies up and down the country paying homage to the internationalist fighters.

Accordingly, for reasons of time in moments of hard revolutionary work, I shall confine myself to a brief

review of certain key events in the writing of that glorious page of our revolutionary history.

As early as 1961, when the Algerian people were engaged in an astonishing struggle for their independence, a Cuban vessel carried arms to the heroic Algerian patriots and returned with some one hundred children, orphaned or wounded in the war. Two years later, when Algeria gained its independence, it was threatened by foreign aggression that drained the country of important natural resources. For the first time, Cuban troops crossed the ocean, and without asking anyone's permission, went to the aid of our Algerian brothers.

It was at this time also, when imperialism had robbed the nation of half its doctors, leaving us with just 3,000, that some dozens of Cuban doctors were sent to Algeria to aid its people.

That marked the beginning, 44 years ago, of what is today the greatest medical mission in history to the peoples of the Third World.

This period, from 1965 onwards, was also the setting for our participation in the independence struggles in Angola and Guinea-Bissau, basically consisting in officer training and dispatch of instructors and supplies.

The disintegration of that nation's colonial empire, weakened by economic ruin and the ravages of war, had begun after the 'Revolution of the Carnations' in Portugal, when Guinea-Bissau won independence in September 1974.

Around 60 Cuban internationalists, including some ten doctors, had stayed with the guerrillas for ten years, since 1964. Mozambique, after a fierce struggle by its people under the leadership of FRELIMO and its chief, the unforgettable brother and comrade Samora Machel, achieved final independence in mid-1975. In July of that year, Cape Verde and Sao Tome also reached that goal.

In the case of Angola, the largest and richest of the Portuguese colonies, the situation was totally different. Washington launched a covert plan to rob the Angolan people of its legitimate rights and install a puppet government. Its main lever was its alliance with South Africa, involving joint training and equipping of the organizations set up by Portuguese colonialism to thwart Angolan independence and turn the country into a condominium of the corrupt Mobutu and fascist South Africa, whose troops it did not hesitate to use to invade Angola.

Dictators, terrorists, thieves and self-confessed racists, without the slightest qualms, swelled the ranks of the so-called 'free world'. A few years later, US president Ronald Reagan, in a particularly cynical gesture, dignified them with the designation "freedom fighters".

In mid-1975, the Zaire army and mercenary forces reinforced with South African heavy weapons and military advisers launched fresh attacks in northern Angola, reaching the outskirts of Luanda. However, the major threat was in the south: South African armored columns in the south were advancing rapidly deep into the territory, with the aim of occupying Luanda with a combined force of racist South African and Mobutu's mercenary troops, before the proclamation of independence on November 11.

At that time, there were only 480 Cuban military instructors in Angola, sent some weeks earlier in response to a request from MPLA president Agostinho Neto, a renowned, prestigious leader who organized and directed his people's struggle for many years, with the support of all the African peoples and with recognition by the world at large. He asked us simply for cooperation in training the battalions that made up the newly-independent state's army. The instructors were only lightly armed.

In early November, a small group of these together with new recruits from the Benguela Revolutionary Instruction Center valiantly fought against the racist army. In the surprise attack by outnumbering South Africans on dozens of young Angolans, eight Cuban instructors were killed and seven wounded.

The South Africans lost six armored cars and other vehicles. They never revealed the numbers of the heavy casualties they sustained.

For the first time, in this remote corner of Africa, Cuban and Angolan blood was shed in the struggle to free that troubled land.

It was at this point that Cuba, in consultation with President Neto, decided to send Interior Ministry special troops and regular members of the Cuban army by air and sea, as fully-equipped fighting troops to confront the aggression by the forces of apartheid.

We took up the challenge without hesitation. Our instructors would not be abandoned to their fate; neither would those selfless Angolan fighters, much less their homeland's independence after 20 years of heroic struggle. Ten thousand kilometers from home, Cuban troops --heirs of the glorious Rebel Army-- engaged in combat with the armies of South Africa, the continent's richest and most powerful nation, and of Zaire, Europe's and America's richest and well-armed puppet state.

Then, the campaign started known as Operation Carlota, code name for the most just, lengthy, large scale and successful internationalist campaign undertaken by Cuba.

The empire could not achieve its aim of dismembering Angola and robbing it of its independence. The long, heroic struggle of the Angolan and Cuban peoples stopped them in their tracks.

We now know much more than we did then about how Washington thought and acted, based on official documents declassified in recent years.

At no time did the US president, or his powerful Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, or the US intelligence services, even imagined the possibility of participation by Cuba. Never before had a Third World country acted to support another people in an armed conflict beyond its geographical neighborhood.

By the end of November, enemy aggression had been halted in the north and in the south. Complete heavy armored units, substantial land and anti-aircraft artillery, armored infantry units up to brigade strength, transported by our merchant fleet, accumulated rapidly in Angola, where 36,000 Cuban troops launched a furious offensive. Attacking the main enemy in the south, they drove South Africa's racist army 1,000 kilometers back to where it came from, Angola's border with Namibia, the racist's colonial enclave. The last South African soldier left Angolan territory on March 27. In the north, Mobutu's regular troops and the mercenaries were driven back across the border with Zaire.

The truth is that Cuba was in favor of exacting a heavy price from South Africa for its adventure: the application of UN Resolution 435 and the independence of Namibia.

On the other hand, the Soviets, worried about possible US reaction, were putting strong pressure on us to make a rapid withdrawal.

After raising strong objections, we were obliged to accede, at least partially, to the Soviet demands. Although not consulted about our decision to send troops to the Republic of Angola, the Soviet Union had subsequently decided to supply arms for the emerging Angolan army and had agreed to some of our requests for material aid during the hostilities. Angola's post-victory prospects without the political and logistic support of the USSR were non-existent.

In the difficult situation created in 1976, Comrade Raul, Cuba's Defense Minister, traveled to Angola for talks with President Neto about the unavoidable need to start a progressive withdrawal of 36,000 Cuban troops over a three-year period, the time Cuba and Angola agreed would be needed to establish a strong Angolan army.

Meanwhile, we would maintain robust combat units in the uplands of the Angolan plateau, some 250 km from the Namibian border.

Neto understood our concerns and nobly agreed to the schedule the withdrawal of Cuba's forces.

Less than a year later, in March 1977 when I was finally able to visit Angola and personally congratulate the Angolan and Cuban fighters on their victory, 12,000 internationalists, one third of our force, had already returned to Cuba, withdrawal operations having gone according to plan up to that point. But, America and South Africa weren't satisfied, and negotiations between Pretoria and secretive Washington were followed in the 1980s by publication of the plot, in the form of Reagan's 'Constructive engagement' and 'Linkage'. The stubbornness of the two powers, coupled with its painful and dramatic consequences, made necessary direct Cuban support for the Angolan people for over 15 years, regardless of the agreed timetable for withdrawal.

Very few people believed we would withstand the US-South African onslaughts for so many years.

That decade saw intensification of the struggles by the peoples of Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa against the colonial yoke and apartheid. Angola became a stronghold for those peoples, whom Cuba also supported. The Pretoria government's actions were invariably treacherous.

Kassinga, Boma, Novo Katengue and Sumbe are scenes of crimes committed by apartheid against the peoples of Namibia, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Angola, and at the same time shining examples of our solidarity in combating the common enemy.

The attack on Sumbe is a particularly eloquent example of their criminal intentions. There were no Cuban or Angolan troops there, only doctors, teachers, construction workers and other civilian collaborators, who the enemy tried to kidnap. But these men and women resisted with their militia rifles, beside their Angolan comrades, until the arrival of reinforcements put the aggressors to flight. Seven Cubans were killed in this unequal battle.

This is just one example, of many that could be cited, of the bravery and self-sacrifice spirit of our internationalists, both military and civilian, ready to offer their sweat or their blood, whenever the need arises, beside their Angolan, Namibian, Zimbabwean or South African comrades, or from the whole African continent since Algeria, the Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and Ethiopia can also be added to the list.

It was an extraordinary achievement by our people, especially our young people; the tens of thousands on active service and those in the reserves who volunteered to do their internationalist duty alongside the career officers and regular troops.

They add up to millions, the men and women on the home front who supported those successful missions, working overtime to stand in for the absentees and making sure the families of the soldiers and civilian collaborators never went short.

The families of our internationalists deserve special mention. With remarkable stoicism, they bore absence, sent words of encouragement with every letter and kept any difficulties or worries to themselves.

Prime examples include the mothers, sons, brothers and sisters and spouses of our fallen compatriots. All, without exception, have come to terms with their loss. They have been able to transform their profound grief, which was echoed throughout the nation during Operation Tribute, into greater love of the homeland, into stronger loyalty and respect for the cause for which their loved one willingly risked his life.

A people willing to perform such a feat: what would it be capable of if called on to defend its own land!

This is not the right time to discuss the differing strategic and tactical conceptions of the Cubans and the Soviets.

We trained tens of thousands of Angolan soldiers and acted as advisers in the instruction and combat operations of Angolan troops. The Soviets advised the military high command and provided ample supplies of weaponry to the Angolan armed forces. Actions based on the advice given at the top level caused us quite a few headaches. Nonetheless, great respect and strong feelings of solidarity and understanding always prevailed between the Cuban and Soviet military.

The end of 1987 saw the well-publicized last major invasion of Angolan territory by South African forces, in circumstances that threatened the nation's stability.

On that date, South Africa and the United States launched the last and most dangerous attack on a strong contingent of Angolan troops that was advancing through sandy terrain towards Jamba, on the southeast edge of the Angolan border, presumed location of Savimbi's command post, offensives we had always opposed if not actually prevented eleventh-hour attacks by South Africa's air force, its heavy artillery and armored forces.

History repeated itself. The enemy, greatly emboldened, advanced strongly, towards Cuito Cuanavale, an old NATO airbase. Here it prepared to deliver a mortal blow against Angola.

Desperate calls were received from the Angolan government appealing to the Cuban troops for support in fending off presumed disaster; it was unquestionably the biggest threat from a military operation in which we, as on other occasions, had no responsibility whatever.

Titanic efforts by the Cuban political and military high command, despite the serious threat of hostilities which hung over us as well, resulted in assembling the forces needed to deliver a decisive blow against the South African forces. As in 1975, our homeland rose to the occasion. A flood of troops and weaponry rapidly crossed the Atlantic, landing on Angola's south coast in order to attack in the south west, in the direction of Namibia. At the same time, 800 km to the east, special units advanced towards Cuito Cuanavale, where they joined up with retreating Angolan forces to set up a lethal trap for the powerful South African forces heading for that large airbase.

This time, Cuban troops in Angola numbered 55,000.

So while in Cuito Cuanavale the South African troops were bled, to the southwest 40,000 Cuban and 30,000 Angolan troops, supported by some 600 tanks, hundreds of pieces of artillery, 1,000 anti-aircraft weapons and the daring MIG-23 units that secured air supremacy, advanced towards the Namibian border, ready to literally sweep up the South African forces deployed along that main route.

A great deal could be said about all the engagements and incidents in that campaign.

Here with us are Comrade Polo Cinta Frías, the bold commander of the Angola southern front at that time, and many comrades who took part in the actions of those glorious, unforgettable days.

The resounding victories in Cuito Cuanavale, especially the devastating advance by the powerful Cuban contingent in southwest Angola, spelled the end of foreign aggression.

The enemy had to set aside its usual arrogance and sit down at the negotiating table. The talks culminated in the Peace Accords for Southern Africa, signed by South Africa, Angola and Cuba at the UN headquarters in December 1988.

The accords were designated as quadripartite, since the Angolans and the Cubans sat on one side of the table with the South Africans opposite; the United States occupied a third side, given its role as

mediator. In reality, America was judge and party, an ally of the apartheid regime. Its rightful place was alongside the South Africans.

The head of the US delegation, undersecretary Chester Crocker, for years opposed Cuba's participation. But given the seriousness of the military situation for the South African aggressors, he had no choice but to accept our presence. In a book he wrote about these events, he was quite right in observing that when the Cuban delegates entered the conference room, the talks were about to change for good.

This Reagan administration spokesman was well aware that with Cuba at the negotiating table, dirty tricks, blackmail, intimidation and lies would not succeed.

There would be no repeat of what happened in Paris in 1898, when the Americans and the Spanish held peace talks without Cuban representation, the Liberation Army and the government of Cuba in arms.

This time the Revolutionary Armed Forces and the legitimate representation of Revolutionary Government of Cuba were present together with the Angolan Government.

The internationalist mission was fully accomplished. Our troops came back to the homeland with heads held high, taking with them only the friendship of the Angolan people, the weapons they had wielded with honor and bravery thousands of miles away from their homeland, the satisfaction of duty done and the glorious mortal remains of our fallen brothers and sisters.

Their contribution was decisive in consolidating Angola's independence and achieving that of Namibia. It was also a significant contribution to the liberation of Zimbabwe and the demise of South Africa's repugnant apartheid regime.

Rarely in history has war, the most terrible, heartrending and difficult of human actions, been accompanied by such humanism and humility on the part of the victors, despite the near-total absence of these values in the ranks of the vanquished. Firmness of principle and purity of aims explain the complete transparency of every campaign undertaken by our internationalist fighters.

Beyond doubt, a decisive ingredient is the tradition established by our freedom combatants in the epic struggles for independence, reinforced by rebels and fifth-column fighters during the War of National Liberation and carried on by the militia, by members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior, since the Revolution, against enemies abroad and at home.

That heroic saga has never been told in full. On its 30th anniversary, American imperialism went out of its way to prevent any mention of Cuba even at the commemorative ceremonies. To cap it all, it tried to rewrite history: Cuba, it seems, never played any part at all in Angolan independence, Namibian independence or the defeat of the until-then invincible army of apartheid. In fact, Cuba doesn't even exist; it's a figment of people's imagination. It is as if the US government had absolutely nothing to do with the hundreds of thousands of Angolan dead, the thousands of villages razed to the ground, the millions of landmines planted in Angolan territory, where they still take the lives of many children, women and other civilians.

That is an insult to the peoples of Angola, Namibia and South Africa, who fought so hard, and a gross injustice to Cuba, the only non-African nation that fought and shed its blood for Africa and against the shameful apartheid regime.

Now, US imperialism is extracting billions of dollars from Angola, plundering its natural resources and draining its oil and other non-renewable resources. Cuba has been true to the word of the famous anti-colonial leader Amílcar Cabral: "Cuban fighters are ready to lay down their lives for the liberation of our countries, and in exchange for this aid to our freedom and the progress of our people, all they take from us are their comrades who fell fighting for freedom".

The absurd attempt by the Americans to ignore the honorable role played by Cuba offends the African peoples. It is partly due to the fact that the full history of these events has not been recorded.

Prestigious researches make great efforts in seeking information. Cuba, for its part, has never wanted to write it and avoids talking about what it did with such selflessness and spirit of solidarity. We are ready, however, to lend our modest aid, progressively releasing the relevant files and documents, to serious, reputable writers interested in giving a true account of those events. (Applause)

The Angola achievement and the struggle for Namibia's independence against the fascist apartheid regime are a source of much strength to our people. The countless acts of heroism, self-sacrifice and humanism performed by over 300,000 internationalist fighters and some 50,000 Cuban civilian collaborators, who on a totally voluntary basis participated in missions to Angola, are a treasure of immense value.

This noble tradition is now being carried on by tens of thousands of doctors and other professionals, as well as health workers, teachers, sports coaches and other specialists who express their solidarity often by working in difficult, including war-zone conditions, as in the case of the celebrated 'Henry Reeve' Contingent.

The name of that operation is both symbolic of and homage to the thousands of slaves who perished in combat or were executed during the early uprisings.

Those brought to the fore women such as Carlota, a lucumi African from the slaves at the Triunvirato refinery in Matanzas, who in 1843 led one of the many uprisings against the terrible stigma of slavery, losing her life in the attempt.

Independence fighters, rebels, clandestine fighters, combatants in Giron, the October crisis and the campaign against bandits and internationalists, militiamen, members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior, all in all, the combative people, are the fruit of the productive tree that grew in this land from African and Spanish roots.

Hundreds of Cubans left for Spain in the 1930s, when the Republic was attacked by fascism and reactionary forces, and many lost their lives there.

Forty years later, Cuban fighters arrived in Africa, with their strength multiplied by the Revolution at home, to defend a people threatened by the same enemies. There, 2,077 comrades perished.

Without brushing off the dust of the road, as Marti did before the statue of Bolivar, the members of the last internationalist contingent to return to the homeland, together with the leaders of the Revolution, paid homage at the tomb of the Titan to all those who died in the struggles of our people.

Once again, we reaffirm an eternal commitment to our glorious dead, to carry forward the Revolution and to be always worthy of their example; to the Cubans, past and present, ready to fight and die with honor in defense of justice; and to the men and women who, like Maximo Gomez, Henry Reeve and Che Guevara, have done so much to show us, here in our homeland and throughout history, the immense value of solidarity.

Present and future generations of Cubans will continue to advance however difficult the road ahead, fighting restlessly to defend the Revolution, keeping it as impregnable politically as it is militarily and as it soon will be economically.

We shall redouble our efforts to remedy our shortcomings and correct our mistakes. The fight will go on. We shall always resist.

We shall continue to defeat every act of imperialist aggression, refute the lies of its propaganda and

expose its political and diplomatic chicanery.

We shall continue to withstand the effects of the embargo, which will be defeated one day by the dignity of the Cuban people, the solidarity among the peoples, the near total opposition of the international community --as was demonstrated yet again by the voting at the UN-- and by growing opposition on the part of the American public to an absurd policy that flagrantly violates their constitutional rights.

Just as the imperialists and their lackeys suffered in Angola the consequences of a Giron multiplied several times over, those who land here to wage war will face thousands of Quifangondos, Cabindas, Ebos, Meduna Morros, Cangambas, Ruacanas, Tchipas, Calueques and Cuito Cuanavales. (Applause)

Our internationalists, like the rest of the Cuban fighters, which means the entire Cuban people, know that in the event of military aggression, we shall defeat the invader. And you, veterans of our homeland's history, will be among the heroes of that victory!

Long live internationalism! ([Shouts of "Long live!"])

Long live the Revolution! (Shouts of "Long live!")

Long live socialism! (Shouts of "Long live!")

Ever onwards to victory!

[Ovation]

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