
A Lost Chance for Peace

The Bicesse Accords in Angola

Virginia Page Fortna

In 1991, the combatants in Angola's longstanding civil war signed a peace agreement. But the country was soon back at war in a conflict that would grind on for another decade. Three particular problems in the peace process led to the failure of Angola's first "best chance for peace."¹ First, the peacekeeping mission was extremely limited, partly because the international community hoped to keep peace as cheaply as possible. Second, issues of "spoiler" management were handled poorly due to the assumption that Uni o Nacional para a Independencia Total de Angola (UNITA) would win the elections and that the Movimento Popular de Libertac o de Angola (MPLA) would not be able to contest the win by force. Third, elections were held before demobilization, eradicating any incentive that the electoral loser, Jonas Savimbi, had to end the war, thereby squandering the international community's only effective leverage. This combination of mistakes proved disastrous for Angola and added substantial difficulty to subsequent attempts to achieve peace. Eleven years later, the international community and the Angolan parties should reflect upon the failed peace of the past in order to take advantage of Savimbi's death and further the peace process today.

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Background. Contemporary Angola has never known stable peace; civil war erupted on the heels of the war of liberation from the Portuguese. What started as a three-way fight among rival nationalist groups ended as a war between the governing MPLA, led since 1979 by President Jos Eduardo dos Santos, and UNITA, led by Jonas Savimbi. The conflict was primarily a struggle for control of the state and the country's rich oil, diamond, and mineral resources, rather than an ethnic or identity conflict.² The conflict was expressed in Cold War ideological terms: the MPLA espoused socialism, and was backed by both the Soviet Union and Cuba, while UNITA took an anti-communist line, winning support from the United States and South Africa.³ In 1988, as Cold War tensions waned, Cuba and South Africa agreed to withdraw troops and cease military activity in Angola. Within a few years, the stalemate on the battlefield, U.S. and Soviet pressure, and Portuguese mediation induced dos Santos and Savimbi to sign the *Accordos de Paz para Angola*, often called the Bicesse Accords.⁴

When the Accords were signed in May 1991, Angola was not viewed as a particularly difficult peacekeeping case. This overly optimistic assessment was a result of the previous success of the United Nations during Cuba's withdrawal from Angola, external support for peace by the superpowers whose rivalry had driven the war, and the non-ethnic, non-secessionist character of the war. As Angola was rich in natural resources, it was hoped that they would pay for much of the peace implementation. However, this initial underestimation of the situation coupled with the failure of Angola's first real chance for peace, made subsequent attempts much more difficult.

The Peace Agreement. Three tenets comprised the Bicesse Accords: a cease-fire supervised jointly by the two Angolan parties; the demobilization of MPLA and UNITA forces in order to create an integrated national army; and multi-party elections. A Joint Political-Military Commission (CCPM) was established to oversee the peace process. It consisted of representatives from the MPLA and UNITA, with the UN and the "Troika"—Portugal, the United States, and the Soviet Union—participating as observers. Unlike the arrangements in many other peacekeeping cases, implementation of the Accords was primarily the responsibility of the belligerents. The UN peacekeeping observation mission, UNAVEM II, was mandated only to monitor the progress of the Angolan process. Although the UN was eventually called on to play a more substantial role, it was severely limited by having to work through the unwieldy CCPM.

The Bicesse agreement was a tall order on a very tight timetable, allowing only 16 months between the signing of the Accords and elections. In that time the country, whose infrastructure was in shambles, had to demobilize 150,000 troops, form a new army, extend government authority to the one-third of the country held by UNITA, and implement voter registration and polling. Furthermore, major components of the agreement had not been fully resolved. A telling section of the Accords entitled "Concepts for Issues Still Pending between the Government and UNITA" enumerated demobilization logistics, specifics of creating a neutral police force, and details about who would setup the army. Quarrels over these details, especially the creation of the police force,

quickly undermined trust and cooperation within the CCPM.⁵ Meanwhile, technical difficulties, resulting from woefully inadequate time and resources, provided excuses for deliberate non-compliance by both parties.

ther the United States nor the Soviet Union viewed Angola as a high priority. The primary work of maintaining peace fell to the UN, even though it had played a minimal role in the negotiations. Both the peace accords and

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The president was to be elected by a majority of the people, while the National Assembly was to be elected through a system of proportional representation. The Accords established a National Electoral Commission consisting of UNITA and MPLA representatives to oversee the elections. UNAVEM was later asked to help monitor these elections.

In retrospect, many have argued that a major flaw of the Bicesse Accords was the “winner-take-all” presidential contest, as opposed to a power-sharing arrangement.⁶ Both sides, however, saw the elections as a chance to win at the ballot box what they could not win on the battlefield: legitimate power to rule Angola alone. Neither party desired to share power, and the United States, believing its proxy would win, did not push for it. Only when it appeared that UNITA might lose did outside mediators begin to press for power-sharing arrangements.⁷

Implementing Bicesse. External involvement prolonged the war for years, but when it came time to implement the peace, Angolans were left largely to their own devices. While there was support in principle from the Troika, its role on the ground was limited. Portugal was less active in implementation than in mediation, and nei-

the UN Security Council gave UNAVEM II a restricted mandate: strictly to observe the work of the CCPM, not to keep peace directly.

Because the belligerents had protested against extensive outside involvement, UNAVEM’s mandate was overly limited. The MPLA was particularly touchy about sovereignty issues and presumably feared a pro-UNITA bias on the part of the U.S.-dominated international community. UNITA, on the other hand, seemed to want to avoid a strong presence that would enforce the demobilization provisions of the agreement. The international community, feeling the strain that new missions would impose, was all too happy with preserving peace as inexpensively as possible.⁸

The resources provided for implementing the Bicesse Accords were incredibly limited given Angola’s vast size and the inaccessibility of most of the country. The initial 18-month allocation for UNAVEM II was \$132.3 million for a country of 12 million people.⁹ The mission consisted of 350 military observers, 126 police observers, an electoral division of 400 poll monitors, and a civilian staff of 242.¹⁰ Compare this with 4,650 troops, 1,500 police monitors, an electoral team of 900, and the \$368.5 million spent in about 1 year in Namibia, a

country with 1/8 the population of Angola. This lack of spending reflected the reluctance of those paying the bill rather than a genuine or realistic assessment of what Angola needed.

Implementation was behind schedule from the beginning. Beset with logistical and technical problems, the process was often deadlocked by disagreements between the MPLA and UNITA and further disrupted by the unwieldy machinery of the CCPM. Lack of accurate information on the number of troops in each army hampered both planning for demobilization and its verification. The difficulties of deploying soldiers to remote areas delayed the cantonment of the military forces. Lack of adequate food, tents, and supplies made it difficult to keep troops assembled. Many MPLA troops simply left the camps. Secure storage of weapons was also a problem in remote areas, where most buildings were grass huts. Demobilization teams, spread thin and without essential resources, delayed the creation of the new army. A small, purely symbolic force was hastily sworn in the day before elections.¹¹

Even with more resources, time, and planning, technical and logistical delays could not have been surmounted in implementing the Accords. The real problem was deliberate non-compliance. Technical difficulties provided cover for deception, although it soon became apparent that both sides were holding troops in reserve to contest an electoral defeat or in case the war resumed. Non-compliance by both parties fueled the other's suspicions, but UNITA was the worse offender. The government had trouble getting and keeping troops at the new army camps, in part because UNITA troops remained mobilized and ready to fight.

Estimates indicate that the MPLA kept 10,000 troops mobilized, while UNITA kept 30,000.¹² Two days before the elections, 65 percent of MPLA's troops had demobilized, but only 26 percent of UNITA's had. UNITA tipped the security equation further in its favor by sending its personnel to areas formerly under MPLA control and hiding arms caches to support an offensive. While intentions are difficult to gauge *ex ante*, UNITA's actions should have set off alarm bells. Why didn't the international community react earlier to deal with UNITA?¹³

The implementers' assessment of politics in Angola was based on the Cold War assumption that Savimbi would win in a democratic election. Believing its own rhetoric, the United States justified supporting UNITA "freedom fighters" struggling for democracy, and assumed that, without strong Soviet backing, the MPLA would simply wither away.¹⁴ Under this assumption, there was no reason to question Savimbi's intent: he would have no reason to upset a peace process that would put him in power. In 1991, with the Soviet Union disintegrating, American views and assumptions became the dominant influence shaping the peace process. Meanwhile, a combination of limited resources for gathering information, including a lack of Portuguese-speakers, and the desire to remain impartial made it difficult for UNAVEM to brand Savimbi a spoiler.

Furthermore, growing evidence of UNITA's plans was also downplayed or ignored. There were plenty of indicators that the militaries kept forces in reserve, especially those of UNITA. UNAVEM was aware of the discrepancy in demobilization rates, and of claims by UNITA defectors of 20,000 troops and arms

caches hidden in the bush.¹⁵ Before the elections Savimbi stated that "if UNITA does not win, then it means fraud."¹⁶ It was clear that he planned to contest the elections by force if he lost.¹⁷ But the international community did nothing to alter this incentive to use force.

Meanwhile, the electoral exercise in Angola was extremely well monitored and implemented. Given the short timetable and logistical obstacles, both the registration of about 4.86 million Angolans (92 percent of those eligible) and the polling itself were minor miracles. Elections took place without major incident on September 29-30, 1992, with 91 percent of those registered voting.¹⁸

Because priority was placed on elections rather than on demobilization or other aspects of the peace agreement, implementers stuck to the original deadline for elections rather than the sequence on which the timetable was based: complete demobilization with a single integrated army in place before the election. The purely symbolic creation of a new army the day before elections is indicative of the extent to which wishful thinking and a rigid timetable for elections took precedence over the substance of what was needed for stable peace.

The MPLA won the legislative elections, with dos Santos taking just under 50 percent of the presidential vote and Savimbi 40 percent. Electoral law required a second round if no one achieved 50 percent, but it was never held. As soon as he realized he had lost, Savimbi took up arms. His adherence to the cease-fire had hinged on the belief that UNITA would win the elections. Knowing the outcome, and with his army still intact, there was no reason for him to continue to respect

the cease-fire or to accept defeat. Yet, rather than taking action against Savimbi, UNAVEM reduced its troop strength and hunkered down in Luanda.¹⁹ By October, Angola had plunged back into a full-scale war. While the elections were the only part of the peace implementation that ran smoothly and on schedule, they clearly should have been delayed to ensure post-election stability.

Although they could have postponed elections, both Angolan parties were anxious to hold a contest each thought it would win. Third parties did not press for an extension, nor was strong pressure applied to either side for failing to demobilize. Both UNAVEM and the Troika were suffering from the "Tinkerbell syndrome," as one British diplomat called it, hoping "that if they believed hard enough in the process and avoided criticizing the parties...the country's political transition would be successful."²⁰ The United States had little desire to point out UNITA's non-compliance, while the UN preferred making "even-handed" criticisms to avoid the perception of partiality.²¹ This combination of wishful thinking, the desire to be seen as impartial, and U.S. bias, added up to a peacekeeping mission that failed to condemn flagrant violations of the peace agreement, which resulted in outright aggression.

In retrospect, the policy looks like appeasement. The international community tried to cajole Savimbi into a series of negotiations between October 1992 and March 1993. The United States and the UN eventually imposed sanctions on UNITA, but only after Savimbi had completely destroyed the peace process and overrun two-thirds of the country. Sanctions eventually helped the MPLA reverse UNITA's military gains.

Even so, mediators held out the prospect of a power-sharing agreement to induce Savimbi back to the negotiating table. With the military tide turning against him, the promise of a role in the government coerced Savimbi into signing the Lusaka Protocol in 1994. The Lusaka agreement "fixed" a number of the problems of the Bicesse Accords, moving away from winner-takes-all elections and deploying a much stronger UN force. If this agreement had been implemented in 1991 it might have worked. But the failure of Bicesse made peace in 1994 much more difficult to obtain, and within a few years the Lusaka peace agreement fell apart.

Conclusion. Blame for the resumption of war in 1992 rests squarely on Jonas Savimbi's shoulders, but the international community could have managed the situation much more effectively. The pathetic peacekeeping mission, biased assumptions about Savimbi's electoral prospects, and failure to tie elections to full demobilization squandered Angola's best chance for peace.

Some would argue that the subsequent failure of the Lusaka Accords shows that Savimbi was an intransigent spoiler; that nothing short of his electoral victory, a "Liberia solution," would have created peace.²² Nevertheless, things could have been improved in the first round. Had there been a serious verification presence with more resources, it would have been harder for the parties not to demobilize and the results of the first round of Accords could have been quite different. There would still have been an incentive for both sides to hedge their bets by maintaining mobilized forces, but their non-compliance would have been much more evident. By

insisting on demobilization before elections, as was done in Mozambique, the international community would have given the belligerents a choice: disarm and participate in elections, or face international condemnation for failure to demobilize. Instead they were allowed to have both a shot at winning the election, and a military hedge.

Before the elections, peacekeepers had leverage. Had the United States been willing to pressure UNITA, this leverage would have been improved. Each side had an incentive to cooperate since both thought they could win legitimate power. Although Savimbi would probably still have thrown a tantrum upon losing the vote, had he been pushed to demobilize, he would not have been in a position to destroy the peace so easily. Instead, once Savimbi knew the outcome of the elections, he had nothing to lose by fighting. It became impossible to induce UNITA to demobilize peacefully or respect the cease-fire. By the time a stronger peacekeeping force and a power-sharing agreement were arranged in 1994, it was too late. The failure of the Bicesse Accords condemned Angola to another ten years of war. The war would not end until Savimbi's death and UNITA's defeat in 2002.

While generalizing from a single specific case is imperfect, the failure of the Bicesse accords suggests several broader policy lessons. First, attempts at underfunding and overly-hurrying peace are likely to backfire. The costs of failure, both the physical costs of later attempts at peace in Angola and the damage to UN credibility, outweighed the money saved by sending a skimpy mission. The costs to Angolans of this failure were devastating.

A broader lesson can be derived from the Cold War legacy that blinded

the mission to the spoiler problem with Savimbi. Strict impartiality may not be necessary for successful peacekeeping; in fact the UN's attempt to maintain a semblance of impartiality at all costs probably contributed to the problem, but initial biases toward the parties prohibited objective and realistic assessments of the potential risks to peace. Assumptions about which side will win elections, and how the losing side will react need to be tested carefully. Anticipating potential spoiler problems ahead of time is crucial to tackling them effectively.

Finally, elections should not be held before demobilization is complete. Elections held when both sides maintain the ability to fight is a recipe for disaster. They remove the peacekeeper's most effective leverage and leave the loser little incentive not to fight. A bigger, more adequately financed peacekeeping mission with a realistic timeline, a more objective assessment of the incentives facing the parties, and an insistence that demobilization precede elections might well have created stable peace in Angola. Instead, the country has suffered war for the past decade.

NOTES

1 Paul Hare's book on the Lusaka Accords of 1994 is entitled *Angola's Last Best Chance for Peace* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1998).

2 William Minter, *Apartheid's Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), 103-5.

3 Fernando Andresen Guimaraes, *The Origins of the Angolan Civil War: Foreign Intervention and Domestic Political Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

4 Jos Manuel Dur o Barroso, "CSIS Study Group on Angola," (Washington, DC: Presentation at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 20 February, 1991).

5 Margaret Joan Anstee, *Orphan of the Cold War: The Inside Story of the Collapse of the Angolan Peace Process, 1992-93* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 69-71; Alex Vines, *One Hand Tied: Angola and the UN*, CIIR Briefing Papers (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1993), 5; Moisés Ven ncio, *The United Nations, Peace and Transition: Lessons from Angola*, vol. 3, *Lumina Papers* (Lisbon: Instituto de Estudos Estrat gicos e Internacionais, 1994), 35.

6 See for example, Anthony W. Pereira, "The Neglected Tragedy: The Return to War in Angola, 1992-3," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 32, no. 1 (1994): 1-28. For an interesting critique of power-sharing see William M. Minter, "Sorting out Lessons from the Angolan Elections," (Presented at the African Studies Association, November 1994), 4, 9.

7 Various officials at the United States Department of State and United States-Angola Chamber of Commerce, interview by author, Washington, DC, 6 August 1998. Also see Anstee, 149.

8 Various officials at the U.S. Department of State, Washington DC, 6 August 1998 and 11 December 1991. Also see UN Document S/22627, 20 May 1991.

9 UN Document S/22627 Addendum I, 29 May 1991. All told UNAVEM II cost \$175.8 million over 4 years. United Nations, *The Blue Helmets: A Review of United Nations Peace-Keeping*, 3rd ed. (New York: United Nations, 1996).

10 United Nations, *The Blue Helmets*, 254.

11 Vines, 17; Ven ncio, 34.

12 Various officials at the U.S. Department of State, Washington DC, interview with author, 6 August 1998; Vines, 17.

13 Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (1997).

14 Various officials at the U.S. Department of State and the Washington Office on Africa, interview with author, Washington, DC, 6 August 1998. See also Minter, "Sorting out Lessons".

15 Anstee, 52-3.

16 Quoted in Anstee, 151.

17 Victoria Brittain, *Death of Dignity: Angola's Civil War* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 49.

18 United Nations, 243.

19 Anstee, 235.

20 Quoted in Ven ncio, 46.

21 Minter, *Apartheid's Contras*, 9; Anstee, 377; UN, 246. See also, Vladim r Krpka, "Peacekeeping in Angola (UNAVEM I and II)," *International Peace-keeping* 4, no. 1 (1997): 90.

22 In 1997, Liberians elected rebel leader Charles Taylor president to prevent him from continuing the civil war.