

Prospects for Armed Struggle in South Africa

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The Armed Struggle Spreads

THE whole of that part of Southern Africa which is controlled by racial minorities is experiencing either consistent and regular guerrilla activity or is faced with advanced preparation for its commencement.

Angola¹ was followed by Mocambique² and then by South-West Africa³. For Portugal (already

extended by the brilliantly successful operations of PGAIC in its West African colony of Guinea Bissao) the problem of guerrilla operations in its territories is beginning to assume the proportions of a major crisis. Early this year Dr. Salazar, speaking of Angola and Mocambique, conceded that "if the troubles there continue very much longer, they will diminish and destroy our ability to carry on".⁴

¹ First outbreaks of organised violence occurred in March 1961. Various factors including division in the guerrilla ranks, and events in the Congo (which accommodated considerable guerrilla reserves) enabled the Portuguese temporarily to render ineffective a movement which at its height had thousands of guerrillas in the field and had gained control of considerable territory in the north. In the last few years a regrouping has taken place and once again there is evidence of guerrilla activity on a number of fronts. The premier organisation leading the liberation struggle in Angola is the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) led

by Dr. Agostinho Neto and Mario Pinto de Andrade. Roberto Holden's GRAE is in disfavour with the OAU.

In a recent interview in Bomako, Mali, Dr. Neto announced that MPLA's headquarters were being moved from Brazzaville to one of the "regions under our control in Angola". He also claimed that "MPLA militants now control one-third of Angolan territory which carries one-fifth of the population". There are reported to be 30,000 Portuguese troops in Angola.

² The armed struggle in Mocambique was launched in September 1964, by FRELIMO an amalgamation of several earlier movements. Dr. Eduardo Mondlane, the

And now the guerrilla front against foreign and minority rule has been extended to Rhodesia where since August 13th, 1967, guerrilla units of South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) and Rhodesia's Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) have been involved in armed clashes with South African and Rhodesian military forces.⁵ The official admission of government losses of eight dead and fourteen wounded in these early engagements is disputed by the ANC and ZAPU, and appears to be an underestimation in the light of the reported number of casualties which filled Rhodesian hospitals. Despite early attempts to denigrate the calibre of the guerrilla forces, the scale of the fighting, the tenacity of the guerrillas in hand to hand combat and the effectiveness and sophisticated quality of some of the ambushes even at this early stage, were a pointer to future possibilities.⁶

According to press announcements, the collaboration between ANC and ZAPU guerrilla forces was not coincidental but was part of joint planned action in the sense that "the fighting that is presently going on in the Wankie area is indeed being carried out by a combined force of ZAPU and ANC which marched into the country as comrades-in-arms on a common route, each bound to its destination. It is the determination of those combined forces to fight the common settler enemy to the finish, at any point of encounter as they make their way to their respective fighting zones".⁷

This alliance has its historical roots in a situation which, in many fundamental respects, is common

President of FRELIMO claims to control a fifth of the country (northern districts of Niassa and Cabo Delgado). There are reported to be 50,000 Portuguese troops in Mocambique.

³ According to evidence which emerged in the recent trial in Pretoria, South Western African guerrillas under the control of the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) established a training camp in the territory in 1965 which operated undetected for close on a year.

⁴ Quoted in an editorial in the Johannesburg *Rand Daily Mail* (6/1/1968).

⁵ According to press reports the main areas of operations appear to have been at Wankie, Zambesia River Valley, Northern Matabeleland, and the District of Bulawayo, West of the Livingstone Bulawayo railway, Urungwe district and the Siplilo district.

The biggest clash lasting 48 hours appears to have been at Tjolotje. The usual ploy of describing the joint efforts of the Vorster-Smith armed forces as a "police action" is open to question when regard is had to facts like the use of Hunter jets, armed helicopters, etc.

⁶ Report of Lawrence Fellows (*New York Times*, 5/10/1967).

⁷ Statement issued on August 19th, 1967, by Oliver Tambo, Deputy President of the ANC and J. R. D. Chikerema, Vice-President of ZAPU.

to both peoples. Rhodesia under Smith is more and more embracing the South African type of political framework. Its survival in the face of a moderate amount of international pressure is almost undoubtedly due to the considerable bolstering up of its economy by South Africa. This same role of saviour of "white civilisation" in Rhodesia is being played by South Africa in the military field.

In Rhodesia

It is reasonable to infer that if the Smith group could have avoided calling in South African troops to cope with the first batch of guerrillas it would have preferred to do so. As it is, it lays itself open to the charge that its capacity to muster sufficient internal support to deal with this type of situation is suspect. And indeed it is inconceivable that, in the long run, this micro-community of 200,000 whites could muster either sufficient resources or morale to cope with a growing guerrilla movement which would in varying degrees gain the allegiance of the politically deprived four million Africans.

The presence of South Africa's armed forces on Rhodesian soil is an indication (if another is really needed) that the minority régimes in the whole of Southern Africa have come to regard the survival of white rule as indivisible. In this sense South Africa's strategic borders are more and more conceived as extending to the northernmost parts of Angola, Mocambique and Rhodesia.⁸ In this sense too there must be an extremely important strategic connection between the efforts of the guerrilla forces in every part of occupied Southern Africa and we can therefore expect increasing collaboration between all the organisations in the area which stands at the head of people's armed units.

The enormity of the task facing ANC guerrillas

⁸ FRELIMO has for long claimed that South Africa has been helping to arm and train the Portuguese; also that whites from South Africa have been fighting in the Portuguese units. In October 1967 the South African Foreign Minister spoke of "mutual security arrangements" between South Africa and the other states in Southern Africa. Also a clear pointer of things to come is contained in the report (*Johannesburg Sunday Times*, 26/11/1967) of a speech by the Administrator of Natal, Mr. T. J. A. Gardener, on the occasion of the establishment of the Mocambique Soldiers' Comfort Fund, in which he said that to fob off terrorism as the actions of a few thousand disorganised and ill-trained insurgents was dangerous and irresponsible and that it was time South Africans realised that if the 80,000 soldiers whom Portugal had in Mocambique and Angola had to be withdrawn tomorrow South Africa would become involved in the terrorist war within weeks. He said further that South Africa would have the fullest justification "to extend its Rhodesian fight against terrorists to the two Portuguese territories".

within South Africa itself gave rise previously to suggestions that the liberation of Southern Africa should be approached as a project to be achieved in geographic stages—first Mocambique, then Angola and in the end South Africa. This strategy appears never to have found favour in the ANC or in any of the other liberatory movements: and for good reason. There can be little doubt that when Portuguese rule in Angola and Mocambique reaches a crisis point, Salazar's friends in South Africa (looking to their own future) will intervene on a massive scale. Their capacity to do so and their capacity to meet mounting military pressures in Rhodesia, will, in part, be dependent upon events within their own country and in particular, on the extent to which the South African guerrilla probes take root and menace internal stability. Similarly, every victory in Angola, Mocambique, South-West Africa and Rhodesia, brings with it untold psychological and material advantages for armed units operating within the Republic.

The South African Guerrillas

The ANC has not attempted to hide the fact that its guerrillas are in the process of making their way to their own fighting zone. An underground leaflet—*We are at War*—distributed recently by the ANC's illegal apparatus within the country, talks of the Rhodesian battles and states "soon there will be battles in South Africa. We will fight until we have won, however long it takes and however much it will cost".

Is this idle talk? The inherent weakness of the Smith group and the Portuguese and their vulnerability to organised military insurrection is patent. Can the same be said of South Africa at this stage? Is it not being too sanguine to expect a successful outcome to armed confrontation between the very considerable resources and weapons of the white controlled South African state and the inexperienced lightly armed guerrillas? Where are the sanctuary-providing and logistically important friendly borders? Where are the Sierra Maestras, the jungles, the swamps, the paddy fields?

These questions have reference to the sort of model which has been built up over the years in people's minds of the ideal and classical type set of conditions which make guerrilla operations a feasible proposition and they undoubtedly have an important place in any serious assessment of its prospects. But we must not overdo historical analogy. There is in fact no classical type model of physical conditions to which successful guerrilla struggle conforms. Different geographical factors call for different methods and forms of guerrilla struggle.⁹ I shall return to this.

Political Prerequisites

The only universal prerequisites are to be sought in the general political situation rather than in physical or geographic factors. Given a colonial type situation, armed struggle becomes feasible if and only if the following political conditions are present.

Firstly, a disillusionment on the part of the majority of the people with the prospect of achieving its liberation by traditional and non-violent processes,

Secondly, a readiness on the part of the people to respond in varying degrees and ways to the call for armed confrontation—from actually joining the guerrillas to making his path easy and that of the enemy hard,¹⁰ and

Thirdly, the existence of a political leadership capable not only of gaining the organised allegiance of the people for armed struggle but which has both the experience and the ability to carry out the painstaking process of planning, preparation and overall direction of the conduct of operations.

A final judgment on the extent to which the present South African situation conforms to these requisites needs a little more than formal statistical and analytical equipment. It requires assessments by indigenous political activists who know and understand not only the demonstrable facts but who, in addition, have a "feel" for their people, a sensitivity to their mood and the sort of revolutionary instinct which enables them at every given stage to differentiate between the possible and the fanciful. These qualities are nurtured by years of intimate political nexus between a leader, a people, and a situation. We must approach with extreme caution the attempts of outsiders (however well-motivated) whether it be in Africa or Latin America, to legislate for others in this respect.

In South Africa, as in all other countries, a true assessment of these factors is primarily the function of the Liberatory organisations and their leaders.

Objective and Subjective Conditions

Of course favourable conditions for armed struggle ripen historically. But the historical process must not be approached as if it were a mystical thing outside of man which in a crude deterministic sort of way sets him tasks to which he responds. In this sense to sit back and wait for the evolution of objective conditions which constitute a "revolutionary situation" amounts in some cases to a dereliction of leadership duties. What people, expressing themselves in organised activity, do or abstain from doing, hastens or retards the historical process and helps or hinders the creation of favourable con-

⁹ Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, Chapter 1.

¹⁰ Leaflet—*We are at War*.

ditions for armed struggle. *Indeed in one sense the process of creating favourable conditions for military struggle does not end until the day of victory.* Given the sort of minimum preconditions I referred to above, the actual commencement and sustaining of guerrilla activity operates as an extremely important factor in creating more favourable conditions for eventual victory. But it is not the sole factor.¹¹ Other forms of mass activity, including those inspired by the success of the guerrilla units also play a vital role.

Of course, no political struggle (and this is what guerrilla struggle essentially is) can be taken up only on condition of infallibly favourable chances.¹² It does not, however, follow that licence must be given for every act of adventurism, irresponsibility and "trying your luck".

There is not a single serious segment of the organised liberatory movement which does not believe that, in a general sense, political conditions in South Africa are favourable for the commencement and development of armed struggle. This does not necessarily imply a belief that there exists at the moment a classical-type revolutionary situation, with an all-round revolutionary insurrection as an immediate possibility.

Militancy in the Towns

Is there evidence that the course upon which the ANC has embarked has a political basis in the existing South African situation? There is, I believe, abundant evidence that it has.

The Africans of South Africa have a history which is rich in resistance to alien rule not only in the initial period of colonisation but also in the last few decades when it reached new heights. The people have over and over again demonstrated their

¹¹ Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution* tends to proceed from the proposition that "the most important form of propaganda is military action" to a conclusion that in most of Latin America the creation of militarily skilled guerrilla foci is sufficient to bring about favourable conditions for an eventual people's military victory. Thus he underrates the vital connection between the guerrilla struggle (which in its early stages must of necessity be of a limited magnitude) and other forms of militant mass activity. He sees the *FOCO* (which in terms of his approach must assume overall political as well as military leadership) as having (certainly in the initial phases) to cut itself off from the local population. There are many indications including the increasing devotion of resources to mass illegal propaganda throughout the country that the ANC's approach on this important question is different.

¹² "World History would indeed be very easy to make if the struggle were taken up only on condition of infallibly favourable chances"—Karl Marx in a letter to L. Kugelmann (April 17th, 1871).

capacity to act at a most sophisticated political level.

The 1950s and early 1960s witnessed four impressive nation-wide general strikes all called by the ANC and its allies. The significance of these strikes should not be underestimated. On each occasion, hundreds of thousands of urban workers risked their jobs and their consequent right to remain in an urban area, in quest not for reform, not for better working conditions, but in response to a purely political call to demonstrate a demand for votes, opposition to racial laws and so on.

In the face of repression trade union organisation was minimal and the response was an important pointer to the high level of political consciousness which a half-century of urbanisation combined with vigorous political leadership had inculcated into the townspeople. There are many more examples to be found in the 1950s and 1960s which illustrate the capacity of those in the urban areas to react impressively to calls for action involving both tenacity and sacrifice—the defiance campaign of 1952-3, the bus boycotts of the late 1950s, women's resistance against the extension of pass laws to them, the pre-Sharpeville anti-pass campaigns.

Militancy in the Rural Areas

And what of the people in the countryside, which is the focal point of guerrilla activity in the initial stages? Here, too, there is convincing evidence of a peasantry which, despite centuries of intensive repression, lacks submissiveness. In the very recent past and in many important areas it has demonstrated a capacity for action to the point of armed resistance. In Sekhukhuniland (Transvaal) in the late 1950s the peasantry, partly armed, doggedly resisted the attempts by the authorities to replace the traditional leaders of the people with government-appointed servants—so-called "Bantu Authorities". In Zululand similar resistance was encountered.

The most intense point of peasant resistance and upsurge was amongst the Pondo in the Transkei. By March 1960 a vast popular movement has arisen, unofficial administrative units were set up including People's Courts. From the chosen spots in the mountains where thousands of peasants assembled illegally came the name of the movement—"INTABA" (the mountain). Although this revolt had its origin in local grievances, the aim of the resistance soon became the attainment of basic political ends and it came to adopt the full programme of the ANC.¹³

What is also significant about many of these

¹³ A detailed description of these events and their significance is contained in *South Africa: The Peasants' Revolt* by Govan Mbeki. (Penguin African Library.)

actions in the countryside is that, despite the traditionally strict legal sanctions against the possession by non-whites of any arms or ammunition, they always manage on appropriate occasions to emerge with an assortment of prohibited weapons in their hands.

These then are pointers to the validity of the claim by the ANC that the African majority of the country can be expected to respond in growing numbers to a lead which holds out real prospects of destroying white supremacy, albeit in a long and protracted war. The convictions held by all African political groupings (except those sponsored by the government) that the white state can be shifted by nothing short of violence, reflects what is today both an incontrovertible objective fact and a belief held by a majority of ordinary people both in town and countryside.

The Objective Difficulties—Military and Economic Superiority

If then all these subjective elements in the situation tend to argue in favour of the ANC decision, what about some of the formidable objective difficulties? On the face of it the enemy of the guerrilla is in stable command of a rich and varied economy which, even at the stage when it is not required to extend itself, can afford a military budget of £186 million. He has a relatively well-trained and efficient army and police force. He can draw on considerable manpower resources because he has the support of most of the 3½ million privileged whites who can be expected to fight with great ferocity and conviction (albeit one that is born of economic aggrandisement).

In addition, South Africa has very influential and powerful friends. In a situation of crisis they may well lose their existing public inhibitions to openly associate with and bolster up the racist regime.

If there is one lesson that the history of guerrilla struggles has taught, it is that the material strength and resources of the enemy is by no means a decisive factor. Witness the resources at the disposal of the French in Algeria—at the height of the fighting 600,000 troops were supplied and serviced by a leading industrial nation whose economy was quite outside the area of military operations. In terms of pure material strength and almost limitless resources can anyone surpass the USA in Vietnam? And yet no amount of modern industrial backing, technical know-how or fire power appears to sway the balance in favour of the invaders. What about the spectacle of Grivas and his Cyprus group challenging the British army with 47 rifles, 27 automatic weapons and seven revolvers? ("It was with these arms and these alone, that I kept the fight

going for almost a year without any appreciable reinforcements.")¹⁴

The answer lies in this. Guerrilla warfare, almost by definition, posits a situation in which there is a vast imbalance of material and military resources between the opposing sides. It is designed to cope with a situation in which the enemy is infinitely superior in relation to every conventional factor of warfare. It is par excellence the weapon of the materially weak against the materially strong.

Guerrilla Tactics Designed to Cope With Superior Military Forces

Given its popular character and given a populace which increasingly sides with and shields the guerrilla whilst at the same time opposing and exposing the enemy, the survival and growth of a people's army is assured by a skilful exercise of tactics. Surprise, mobility and tactical retreat makes it difficult for the enemy to bring into play its superior firepower in any decisive battles. No individual battle is fought under circumstances unfavourable to the guerrillas. Superior forces can be harassed, weakened and, in the end, be destroyed.

"There is a saying: 'the guerrilla is the maverick of war'. He practises deception, treachery, surprise and night operations. Thus, circumstances and the will to win often oblige him to forget romantic and sportsmanlike concepts. . . . Some disparaging people call this 'hit and run'. That is exactly what it is! Hit and run, wait, stalk the enemy, hit him again and run . . . perhaps this smacks of not facing up to the enemy. Nevertheless, it serves the goal of guerrilla warfare: to conquer and destroy the enemy."¹⁵

The absence of an orthodox front, of fighting lines; the need of the enemy to attenuate his resources and lines of communication over vast areas; his need to protect the widely-scattered installations on which his economy is dependent (because the guerrilla pops up now here, now there): these are amongst the factors which serve in the long run to compensate in favour of the guerrilla for the disparity in the starting strength of the adversaries. I stress the words *in the long run* because it would be idle to dispute the considerable military advantages to the enemy of his high level of industrialisation, his ready-to-hand reserves of white manpower and his excellent roads, railways and air transport which facilitates swift manoeuvres and speedy concentration of personnel.

The Unfavourable Factors in Perspective

But we must also not overlook the fact that over a period of time many of these very same unfavour-

¹⁴ *The Memoirs of General Grivas* (Longmans), p. 22.

¹⁵ Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 114.

able factors will begin to operate in favour of the liberation force:

- (a) The ready-to-hand resources including food production depend overwhelmingly upon non-white labour which, with the growing intensity of the struggle, will not remain docile and co-operative.
- (b) The white manpower resources may seem adequate initially but must become dangerously stretched as guerrilla warfare develops. Already extremely short of skilled labour—the monopoly of the whites—the mobilisation of a large force for a protracted struggle would place a further burden on the workings of the economy.
- (c) In contrast to many other major guerrilla struggles (Cuba is one of the exceptions) the enemy's economic and manpower resources are all situated within the theatre of war and there is no secure external pool (other than direct intervention by a foreign state) safe from sabotage, mass action and guerrilla action on which the enemy can draw.
- (d) The very sophisticated character of the economy with its well-developed system of communications makes it a much more vulnerable target. In an underdeveloped country the interruption of supplies to any given region may be no more than a local setback. In a highly sensitive modern economic structure of the South African type, the successful harassment of transport to any major industrial complex would inevitably inflict immense damage to the economy as a whole and to the morale of the enemy. (The South African forces would have the task of keeping intact about 30,000 miles of railway line spread over an area of over 400,000 square miles!)

Terrain and Friendly Borders

One of the more popular misconceptions concerning guerrilla warfare is that a physical environment which conforms to a special pattern is indispensable—thick jungle, inaccessible mountain ranges, swamps, a friendly border, and so on.

The availability of this sort of terrain is, of course, of tremendous advantage to the guerrillas especially in the early non-operational phase when training and other preparatory steps are undertaken and no external bases are available for this purpose. When the operations commence, the guerrilla cannot survive, let alone flourish, unless he moves to areas where people live and work and where the enemy can be engaged in combat. If he is fortunate enough to have behind him a friendly border or areas of difficult access which can provide temporary refuge

it is, of course, advantageous, although it sometimes brings with it its own set of problems connected mainly with supplies.¹⁷

But guerrilla warfare can be, and has been, waged in every conceivable type of terrain, in deserts, in swamps, in farm fields, in built-up areas, in plains, in the bush and in countries without friendly borders. *The sole question is one of adjusting survival tactics to the sort of terrain in which operations have to be carried out.*

In any case in the vast expanse that is South Africa, a people's force will find a multitude of variations in topography; deserts, mountains, forests, veld and swamps. There might not appear to be a single impregnable Sierra Maestra or impenetrable jungle but the country abounds in terrain which in general is certainly no less favourable for guerrilla operations than some of the terrain in which the Algerians or the resistance movements in occupied Europe operated. Tito, when told that a certain area was "as level as the palm of your hand and with very little forest" retorted "what a first-class example it is of the relative unimportance of geographical factors in the developing of a rising".

In particular, South Africa's tremendous size will make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the white régime to keep the whole of it under armed surveillance in strength and in depth. Hence, an early development of a relatively safe (though shifting) rear is not beyond the realm of possibility. The undetected existence of the SWAPO training camp for over a year and, more especially, the survival for years in the mountains and hills in the Transkei of the leaders of "INTARA" during the military occupation of the area after the 1960 Pondo revolt are both of importance in this context.

¹⁷ Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, pp. 120-125.

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