

GLOBAL MIGRATION
RESEARCH PAPER
N°4 | 2013

The UNHCR and Angolan Liberation: 1974-1975

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ABSTRACT

This paper covers the actions of the UNHCR in the year and a half leading up to Angola's independence from Portugal, during 1974 and 1975. This period was marked by a rapidly deteriorating political climate in which Angola's three major armed liberation movements struggled for control over the nascent state. The conflict was fuelled by superpower rivalries and outside military interventions. The fighting was preceded by efforts on the part of the liberation movements to repatriate hundreds of thousands of refugees to bolster their own political positions. The UNHCR was confronted with this highly charged situation as it tried to navigate between competing interests to facilitate refugee repatriation. Unfortunately for the agency, their efforts only met with limited success. Disagreements between the rival movements, the increasing tempo of the civil war, Portuguese lack of will, and concerns over the nature of the agency's mandate impeded its activities. Although many of the specific problems faced by the agency at the time have lost some current relevance, other issues such as the burning question of neutrality in conflict zones remains pertinent. Examining past agency failures can help to avoid similar pitfalls in the future.

This paper is a result of the project entitled "UNHCR and the Globalization of Refugee Issues, 1951-1989" – a research project carried out within the Programme for the Study of Global Migration and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Key words: UNHCR, Portuguese decolonization, Angola, refugees

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article stems from the “UNHCR and the Globalization of Refugee Issues, 1951-1989” research project of the Programme for the Study of Global Migration at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. The author would like to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation for funding the project, Professor Jussi Hanhimäki and Dr. Jérôme Elie for their suggestions and support, and Ms. Montserrat Canela Garayola of the UNHCR Archives for facilitating access to the relevant material.

1. INTRODUCTION

The UNHCR's experience in Angola during the civil war surrounding that country's independence constitutes a brief, yet remarkably eventful period in which to examine the organization's operations in a highly violent and fluid political context. Angola's decolonization became the locus of major international and regional conflicts. The political prominence of three major competing armed liberation movements immensely complicated the agency's task. Between 1961 and 1974, conflict between these groups and the Portuguese colonial authorities had displaced millions of people, many of whom fled to neighbouring countries. Thus, during the lead up to Angolan independence, the UNHCR had to face one of the largest and most complicated refugee situations in its history to date.

Despite this, very little scholarship on the Angolan conflict has concentrated on the refugee issue. Hundreds of thousands of Angolan refugees fled to neighboring countries, particularly Zaire, during the anti-colonial war against the Portuguese. These refugee concentrations formed important constituencies for two of the three liberation movements. Deciding their fate thus became a major preoccupation. It also formed a bone of discord that contributed to the bloody fragmentation of the transitional government in the months preceding independence. The UNHCR's efforts to provide assistance during this crucial period in Angola's history, collapsed in the face of the political sensitivity of the refugee situation.

On 25 April 1974, in the course of a long, financially and socially costly colonial conflict in Africa, Portuguese military officers overthrew their country's totalitarian regime. In Angola, this meant that previously banned political parties could publically organize, and the three major liberation movements received a new impetus in their jockeying for position.¹ These three movements, the MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA, became the privileged interlocutors of the Portuguese. The year and half between the Lisbon coup and formal Angolan independence would see increasing levels of violence and warfare between these movements as each tried to assert its own dominance over the new nation. Unfortunately for hundreds of thousands of Angolans, this conflict would persist for nearly three decades.

¹ J.A. Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution Volume II: Exile Politics and Guerrilla Warfare (1962-1976)*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1978, 243.

The *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA) led by Agostinho Neto represented much of the mestiço, or “mixed race” intellectual urban elite, and its Marxist-inspired ideology gained it the support of the Soviet bloc. By mid-1975, the MPLA had solidly established itself in the Angolan capital, Luanda, which became its main operational center. Although neither the Soviets nor the Cubans began their massive assistance to the movement until late in the year, the MPLA’s political orientation worried the United States and its regional allies.

Zaire, the United States, and the People’s Republic of China funnelled significant amounts of financial and military support to the *Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola* (FNLA), led by Holden Roberto, in order to prevent an MPLA victory.² The US and China feared Soviet domination of the country, while Zaire’s motivations stemmed from the desire of its leader, Mobutu Sese-Seko to have a pliant client regime installed in Luanda, as well as a degree of control over the oil-rich Angolan enclave of Cabinda.³ Thus, the FNLA’s principal base of operations lay in the north around the city of Carmona, with easy access to the Zairian frontier.

The *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA), led by Jonas Savimbi, benefited from strong support from the Ovimbundu communities in the center and south of the country, with their primary base focused around Nova Lisboa (later Huambo).⁴ Although UNITA tried to carve out an independent position between the FNLA and the MPLA, while fighting escalated in mid-1975 Savimbi loosely allied himself with Roberto in their mutual struggle against the MPLA. As the civil war progressed later in the year, UNITA began receiving significant military support, including the introduction of ground forces, from apartheid South Africa.⁵

The competition between these three groups, combined with Cold War intrigue and external interventions, had already resulted in a complex conflict environment by early 1975. This environment forced the UNHCR into continual attempts to negotiate an agreement with an increasingly illusory transitional “government” to provide assistance to hundreds of thousands of Angolan returnees from neighboring countries. The politicization of the refugee issue made it difficult to agree to aid certain groups without having the official stamp of approval of all the liberation movements in the country.

² *Ibid.*, 245-246.

³ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁵ R. Hallet, “The South African Intervention in Angola: 1975-76”, *African Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 308, 1978, 378.

This article examines the difficulties experienced by the UN refugee agency when faced with a mandate of strict neutrality in a complex and dynamic conflict environment. A number of political obstacles confronted the agency's efforts to provide assistance. This article outlines these obstacles and evaluates the agency's attempts to circumvent them. Crucially, the agency had to immerse itself in the politically complex world of the Angolan liberation movements and their rivalries. The events surrounding the first year of the Angolan Civil War provide an interesting case study in the relations between the agency and militant non-state actors. Questions of how to provide assistance in dynamic and bloody conflict environments, the role of neutrality, and humanitarian diplomacy continue to plague the international aid community in conflict zones around the world. As this article illustrates, this problem is neither new, nor easily addressed.

2. THE EMERGING CRISIS

As the new Portuguese government began independence negotiations with the various liberation movements in their colonies, the UNHCR evaluated the situation. From the agency's point of view, Angola posed particular problems not present at the time in Portugal's other African colonies, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, and Cape Verde.⁶ Due to the variety of its reciprocally antagonistic liberation movements, final settlement of the Angola issue lay further in the future than for the other territories. Until the Portuguese and the liberation movements came to an agreement for the transfer of power, UNHCR could not yet operate in the country.

However, the agency could assist refugees who had fled from Angola, and did have a vague idea of the potentially immense refugee crisis in the making that could erupt at any time. In a memo to Charles Mace, the Deputy High Commissioner, Planning Officer Pierre Coat reported that although no one knew the amount of Angolan refugees living in Zaire, the number could reach some 500,000.⁷ Until then, the agency had done little for these refugees, who lived in no organized camps or settlements. Coat further noted that "For years our attention has been drawn to the pitiful situation of these people while the practical difficulties in implementing any

⁶ [All UNHCR archival references are from UNHCR Archives, Fonds 11, Series 2 Classified Subject Files of the Central Registry], Box 221 101.GEN General Policy on Liberation Movements [Vol. 1] (1974) - Doc. 4 Memo to Deputy High Commissioner from Pierre Coat, "Territories Under Portuguese Administration—Contingency Plans" 07.08.1974, p.4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

projects have largely jeopardised our efforts to help.”⁸ While a refugee crisis did not seem imminent, Coat acknowledged that “this whole situation is very fluid and should (a) independence come soon, and (b) precisely because of their alleged misery in the Congo, the refugees want to return, we might be faced with requests for assistance of a magnitude unprecedented in our African history.”⁹ With this ominous premonition, the UNHCR began low level of contingency planning for its future role with Angolan refugees.

In the other Portuguese territories, the question of the UNHCR's role revolved around the issue of whether to focus simply on repatriation, or to also include resettlement assistance in the agency's program. Coat reserved a “question mark” for Angola on this issue, while awaiting events. Nonetheless, he did realize that this “question mark” would potentially require an innovative and flexible agency response. This would:

[...] necessitate the opening of new offices on a temporary basis. These new offices, if required, should, in my opinion, be headed by people with a UNHCR background of concrete action (doing things without too much red tape). The outposts could be manned by junior officers of the ICRC type, who should not be too difficult to recruit.¹⁰

In any event, the gravity, size, and increasing urgency of the Angolan issue soon pushed the agency to opt to offer resettlement assistance in addition to its repatriation efforts.¹¹ This required the UNHCR to immediately establish contacts with the principal liberation movements. Indeed, the UN Secretariat in New York authorized the UNHCR to begin sounding out assistance possibilities with the Angolan groups shortly after the Lisbon coup.¹² Due to its location in Zaire and its close relationship with the large Angolan refugee population there, the FNLA naturally became an important interlocutor for the agency. This also partially resulted from the impression in the agency that the FNLA truly held the upper hand and represented the most viable of the

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ Box 221 101.GEN General Policy on Liberation Movements [Vol. 1] (1974) - Doc. 18 Confidential Memo, “Repatriation of refugees originating from Guinea-Bissau Mozambique and Angola,” 10.09.1974, p. 2.

¹² D. Myard, *Une organisation internationale face à la décolonisation de l'Empire Portugais: Le HCR et les angolais d'Afrique centrale et australe (1961-1976): A la recherche d'une identité marquée par les relations tourmentées de l'humanitaire et du politique*, Mémoire de Masters, Institut universitaire de hautes études internationales et du développement (IHEID), 2008, 55.

movements.¹³ By late 1974, the MPLA suffered from factional infighting, and UNITA had not yet established itself as a significant military and political force.

3. THE LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

In August 1974, a high-level delegation from the agency met with FNLA leader, Holden Roberto to express the agency's willingness to contribute to repatriation and resettlement efforts.¹⁴ Roberto favorably received the UNHCR's demarche and told them that the FNLA would soon submit proposals for assistance.¹⁵ However, Albert-Alain Peters, the UNHCR Representative for Central Africa, noted that this assistance was conditioned upon the agreement of the new (and not yet designated) Angolan authorities, the Zairian government, and perhaps Portugal if the repatriation would occur before formal independence. They would also require the agreement of the UN Secretary General for anything related to resettlement assistance.¹⁶ Peters added that the UNHCR could not justify continued financing of refugees in Zaire when the latter could leave at any moment. In response, Roberto claimed that the FNLA did not foresee a return of the refugees before formal independence.¹⁷

By late October, the FNLA's study commission on the refugee situation handed the UNHCR its report on its evaluation of the situation and planning requirements. However, agency officials found the report insufficient and lacking in many details.¹⁸ In a meeting held between Peters and Roberto shortly after the release of the report, Roberto changed his position on the urgency of the situation. He informed Peters that, since the time between the establishment of a transitional government and formal independence would take less than a year, the some 1.5 million refugees should begin returning immediately. Peters felt that this sudden enthusiasm for immediate repatriation stemmed from renewed FNLA certainty that they had a significant advantage over the other two principal movements.¹⁹ He urged headquarters that it

¹³ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 4 Confidential Memo, « Angola-Réunion à Bukavu d'un mini sommet quadripartite Zaïre, Zambie, Congo et Tanzanie, » 30.07.1974 p. 4.

¹⁴ Box 221 101.GEN General Policy on Liberation Movements [Vol. 1] (1974) - Doc. 18 Confidential Memo, "Repatriation of refugees originating from Guinea-Bissau Mozambique and Angola," 10.09.1974, p.2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 6 Memo "Refugiés Angolais—Rapatriement," 26.08.1974 p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 24a, "Note on the Report by the FNLA Commission on the Resettlement of Angolans," 30.10.1974.

¹⁹ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 25, Memo on "Refugiés Angolais-- Rapatriement et Réinstallation," 31.10.1974 p. 2.

should not shy away from its responsibilities and that Holden placed enormous hopes on the agency and its capabilities.²⁰

However, given the limited information available, the UNHCR could do little in the way of repatriation assistance. In a cable to New York, UNHCR Geneva staff described the FNLA's report as "obviously very sketchy and incomplete and no estimated costs are mentioned. Costs [are] practically impossible to estimate by us even approximately on [the] basis [of the] FNLA's document."²¹ The agency could thus take no real action until the FNLA or associated experts could provide more detailed information, particularly on transportation, fuel, food, and communication issues. Additionally, the situation verged on increasing complexity and difficulty as Agostinho Neto, leader of the MPLA, requested that the UNHCR begin to examine the repatriation of other, smaller, refugee groups located in Zambia and Congo-Brazzaville.²²

In late 1974 and early 1975, hard negotiations between the three major liberation movements and the Portuguese authorities resulted in the Alvor Accord, signed in mid-January, 1975.²³ Together, the three movements became the de jure "sole legitimate representatives of the people of Angola."²⁴ This accord created a transitional government charged with writing a new constitution and organizing elections before the declared independence date of 11 November.²⁵ The agreement also established a mixed refugee commission comprising representatives from the three movements. Article 38 of the agreement charged this commission with, "planning and preparing the structures, ways and means required to receive Angolan refugees. The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs will supervise and co-ordinate the action of these commissions."²⁶

However, the advent of the accords challenged the basis for the UNHCR's relationship with the three liberation movements. Despite the fact that they collectively represented the transitional government, they each retained their own interests and ambitions. Although the agency now had an official entity which constituted a

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

²¹ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 33 Cable on FNLA Report from Geneva to New York, 28.11.1974.

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

²³ Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution Volume II*, 255.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ G.M. Khadiagala, "Negotiating Angola's Independence Transition: The Alvor Accords", *International Negotiation* 10, 2005, 293-309.

²⁶ Alvor Agreement, Article 38.

legitimate interlocutor for assistance to repatriated Angolans, its dealings with the individual movements became more complicated because of their rivalries. UNHCR officials began to notice these complications almost from the moment the Alvor Agreement came into force.

Shortly after the signature of the agreement Peters requested a meeting with Roberto to discuss the FNLA's repatriation plans. Roberto explained that, since the movements had agreed upon elections in September, and Independence on 11 November, the UNHCR must urgently provide assistance to repatriate the refugees in Zaire by the end of April at the latest.²⁷

Peters asked whether Roberto spoke on this point as head of the FNLA or as a member of the new transitional government. As if to illustrate the complications of the new political situation, Holden replied that this question had no relevance since the Health Ministry in the transitional government, which the Alvor Accord charged with supervising the refugee commission, would be held by an FNLA nominee. This subtly implied a marginalization of the potential input of the other movements who supposedly played an equal role in the refugee commission. This also foreshadowed a problem often encountered by the agency during the following year when members of the various liberation movements claimed to speak on behalf of the illusory transitional "government."

The meeting took a more ominous turn as Roberto confidently asserted that victory of the FNLA in the September elections lay "beyond the shadow of a doubt."²⁸ He perceived failure as conceivable only with the connivance and vote-rigging of other movements. He noted that an FNLA failure in the elections could lead to a return to hostilities.²⁹ This not-so-subtle expression of FNLA intentions served as an initial indication of the underlying weakness and temporary nature of the Alvor agreement.

At the end of January, Peters met with the FNLA nominee for the position of Health Minister in the new Transitional Government, Samuel Abrigada. According to Abrigada, the FNLA expected some 1.5 million refugees to return from Angola,

²⁷ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 44 Memo from Peters to the High Commissioner, "Rapatriement des réfugiés angolais—Relations HCR/FNLA," 23.01.1975 p.1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

including 650,000 before the end of April.³⁰ Abrigada made it clear that the FNLA expected significant material and financial support from the UNHCR in this endeavor.³¹ The two parties agreed on a series of meetings in order to determine the approximate cost of the operation and to finalize concrete measures for implementation.³²

This desire to help, however, conflicted with the UNHCR's presumed obligation to only treat with the transitional government as the legitimate interlocutor. Indeed, the day following the meeting with Abrigada, the agency sent Peters its official instructions on the matter. Although more than ready to assist the repatriation and resettlement of Angolan refugees from Zaire, the UNHCR wanted to do this within the framework of the recent Alvor Agreement rather than through the FNLA. It thus proposed sending a delegation to Luanda in order to discuss the repatriation with the transitional government.³³

Several days later, Peters again met with Roberto in order to explain the UNHCR's official policy. Roberto replied that he would attempt to get the transitional government to speed up matters, but that the UNHCR should also approach the government of its own accord.³⁴ At this point, Peters brought up the possibility of treating with the Portuguese, since they officially had charge of Angola's foreign relations during the transition.³⁵ Although Peters did not record Roberto's reaction to this possibility, this option became increasingly attractive as the year wore on and factional infighting made the transitional government unworkable.

In late February, the UNHCR sent Peters, along with Antoine Noël, the Chief of the UNHCR's West and Central Africa Regional Section to Luanda to open preliminary talks with the new transitional government on refugee assistance.³⁶ The agency made it clear to the new authorities that, due to the size and urgency of the refugee situation compared to the limited means immediately available to deal with it, the UNHCR would channel all assistance through the transitional government rather than through the

³⁰ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 46, Cable from Peters to Headquarters, 28.01.1975.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 46, Cable from Peters to Headquarters, 28.01.1975.

³³ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 51 Cable from Headquarters to Peters, 29.01.1975.

³⁴ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 55, "Note pour le dossier" from Peters, 3.02.1975.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 64, Memo from Peters to the High Commissioner, "Entretien avec le Président Holden Roberto," 11.03.1975, p.1.

movements. In the meantime, the agency prepared to send a permanent representative to Luanda to discuss the modalities of this assistance.³⁷

Several days after Peters returned to Kinshasa, he again met with Holden Roberto. Peters reiterated the agency's position on repatriation assistance. However, Roberto claimed that the majority of Angolan adults from Zaire had already returned to Angola by their own means and awaited the possibility to bring their family members with them. Therefore, Roberto pleaded that, in order to limit human losses, he at least hoped for some modest aid.³⁸

Nearly two weeks later, the UNHCR's Executive Committee agreed to allocate 1 million US Dollars to cover urgent needs. However, in a cable to Peters in early April, the agency emphasized that it:

[...] belongs to the UNHCR and the Angolan Minister of Health and Social Affairs, and to the mixed refugee commission charged with supervising and coordinating the repatriation and resettlement of Angolan refugees and displaced people, to decide upon the use of this 1 million dollars, in which case, funds may be used for the purchase of vehicles, food, clothing, or medicine in order to improve the repatriation conditions of Angolan refugees on the Zairian side, as desired by President Holden.³⁹

This cable, written in response to Peters' memo from nearly a month earlier, illustrates a significant bureaucratic obstacle to assistance: The agency made aid dependent on the proper functioning of a transitional government which soon proved completely incapable of governing. Meanwhile, urgent needs remained unaddressed.

As political deadlock in Angola continued, so did the needs of the refugees. In the face of continued pleas from the FNLA for assistance in Zaire, Peters made inquiries to other UN agencies in Zaire as to their approaches.⁴⁰ The UNDP informed him that they, as well as UNICEF and the WHO assisted the liberation movements outside of Angola, even though within Angola they worked through the transitional

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁹ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 65, Cable from Noël to Peters, "Entretien avec le Président Roberto Holden [sic]," 0 4.04.1975 (my translation from the original French).

⁴⁰ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 2] (1975-1984), Doc. 67 Memo from Peters to the High Commissioner, "Demande d'assistance du FNLA," 21.05.1975.

government. Peters quickly recommended to headquarters that the UNHCR adopt this approach as well.⁴¹ A month and a half later, the agency agreed to extend the limited assistance it had provided to Angolan refugees in Zaire, but only appropriated some 100,000 dollars to cover some health and education needs.⁴² However, none of this assistance could go towards repatriation operations, nor could the FNLA use it for investment in long-term infrastructure designed to accommodate refugee needs for a longer stay should this prove necessary.⁴³

Despite the ultimate lack of initiatives actually implemented on behalf of the refugees under FNLA influence or authority, the UNHCR did exert considerable efforts to establish good working relations with the movement. However, the agency maintained much less extensive relations with the other two major Angolan groups, the MPLA and UNITA. Indeed, the amount of material in the UNHCR archives dealing with relations with the MPLA prior to Angolan Independence constitutes less than a quarter of that dealing with the FNLA. The issue partly had to do with the material needs of the movement compared to those of the FNLA. The movement principally based itself during its war with Portugal in Congo-Brazzaville and Zambia.⁴⁴ Substantially fewer Angolans had fled to these places than to Zaire. Thus the movement had influence over fewer numbers of refugees than the FNLA. The highest number cited by MPLA authorities requesting agency assistance numbered around 150,000.⁴⁵

Additionally, the MPLA was a divided movement. Shortly after the Portuguese coup, two factions broke off of the main party led by Agostinho Neto.⁴⁶ The largest of these, Daniel Chipenda's *Revolta do Leste* (Eastern Revolt), gradually grew closer to the FNLA and its Zairian government backers as attempts to reconcile the factions substantially broke down in August 1974. Despite managing to retain control of two to three thousand guerillas, Chipenda's movement lacked the degree of political cohesion and discipline that Agostinho Neto's main faction maintained. By November, Neto's

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 2] (1975-1984), Doc. 72 Cable from Headquarters to Peters, "Request for Assistance from the FNLA," 10.07.1975.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ See Marcum's discussion of the Liberation Movements during the Angolan anti-colonial conflict in Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution Volume II*, 1-240.

⁴⁵ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with MPLA (1974-1980), Doc. 10 Letter from MPLA Central Committee member Carlos Rocha to UNHCR Headquarters requesting material assistance, 03.12.1974.

⁴⁶ Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution Volume II*, 248-249.

party had established its headquarters and offices in Luanda, whereas Chipenda remained in Zaire.⁴⁷

The UNHCR did not always seem clear as to whom it considered an appropriate interlocutor when it came to dealing with the MPLA.⁴⁸ Peters felt that, “given the confusion of the situation, we have not yet judged it useful to make contacts with the authorities of the new MPLA office in Kinshasa.” However, he wondered if perhaps he should contact Chipenda’s faction in order to broaden the UNHCR’s points of contact with the movement.⁴⁹

Although Peters had correctly discerned the confusion surrounding Chipenda’s faction, his feeling that contacts with it would multiply contacts with the broader MPLA organization misread the situation. As it turned out, Chipenda’s alliance with Mobutu’s Zaire and the FNLA resulted in his faction’s merger with the latter a month after the signature of the Alvor Agreement.⁵⁰ It simply could not claim to represent many of the movement’s constituents, and it had no legal status in the new transitional government anyway.⁵¹

Nonetheless, in late 1974, Peters did make limited contacts with Chipenda’s group as part of his broader discussions with the FNLA.⁵² In early December 1975, Chipenda’s faction requested UNHCR assistance for Angolan refugees in Zaire affiliated with the MPLA. Oddly, Peters’ deputy, C.J. Carpenter, referred to Chipenda as the “President of the MPLA” and noted that the MPLA requested assistance for some 450,000 refugees, located in regions that strangely coincided with those refugees claimed by the FNLA.⁵³ Although Carpenter did see this claim as suspicious, he did take it seriously.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁴⁸ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with MPLA (1974-1980), Doc. 4 Memo from Peters to High Commissioner on status of MPLA in Zaire, 08.10.1974.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁰ Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution Volume II*, 258.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Box 221 101.GEN General Policy on Liberation Movements [Vol. 2] (1974-1975), Doc. 49, Memo from Peters to the High Commissioner, “Assistance du PNUD à l’Angola par le truchement des mouvements de libération,” 12.11.1974, p. 6.

⁵³ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with MPLA (1974-1980), Doc. 13 Memo from C.J. Carpenter to UNHCR Headquarters, “Request for Assistance from the MPLA,” 10.12.1974, p.1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

In any case, the UNHCR did review a series of requests from the “real” MPLA before the Alvor accords.⁵⁵ In early December, for instance, the movement requested that the UNHCR provide funding and assistance for hospital construction, medical training, food, and transportation for regions in Eastern Angola under its control.⁵⁶ Shortly after the Alvor Agreement, agency officials pursued their discussion with the movement on this request.⁵⁷ However, as they had decided by then to channel assistance through the new transitional government, these discussions remained informal as the agency awaited “official” requests.

At the end of January, Noël met with MPLA President Neto as he passed through Geneva. Although he had just signed the Alvor Agreement, he already began to express skepticism at the enormous number of refugees claimed by the FNLA in Zaire.⁵⁸ He also seemed concerned about the political and economic consequences of such a massive return to Angola.⁵⁹ Indeed, in a letter dated from early February, MPLA Central Committee member Carlos Rocha requested meetings with UNHCR representatives on the resettlement and repatriation issue. Rocha requested financial help for the development of infrastructure for the massive numbers of returning refugees. However, he implied that the return should not take place immediately. Rocha suggested that the situation required much preparatory work since, “Angola’s current economic situation does not allow it to absorb, in the near future, thousands of returning refugees.”⁶⁰ He did, however request assistance for the return and repatriation of hundreds of MPLA leadership cadres.⁶¹

Clearly an immediate and massive return of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Zaire, many of whom fell under the political sway of the FNLA, ran counter to the interests of the MPLA. Delaying that return would prove useful in giving the movement time to consolidate its position in the country. These discussions and requests provide an early indication of the immense problems that the UNHCR would attempt to

⁵⁵ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with MPLA (1974-1980), Doc. 11a Cable to UNHCR Headquarters on discussions between UN agency representatives in Lusaka, sender unknown, 06.12.1974.

⁵⁶ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with MPLA (1974-1980), Doc. 10 Letter from MPLA Central Committee member Carlos Rocha to UNHCR Headquarters requesting material assistance, 03.12.1974.

⁵⁷ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with MPLA (1974-1980), Doc. 24, Note from P. Dos Anjos on conversations with MPLA officials, 21.01.1975.

⁵⁸ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with MPLA (1974-1980), Doc. 26, Note from Noël to High Commissioner on meetings with several MPLA officials, 28.01.1975.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with MPLA (1974-1980), Doc. 37, Letter from MPLA Central Committee member Carlos Rocha to the High Commissioner, 05.02.1975, p. 2 (author’s translation from the original French).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

overcome during the coming months while confronting the power struggle and competing interests among the liberation movements in the transitional government.

As for the other principal Angolan armed group, UNITA, the UNHCR had made no contact before the signature of the Alvor Agreement. As the smallest of the movements at this stage, it had a much smaller presence outside of Angola than had the other movements. Its leader, Jonas Savimbi had also, at various times, aided the Portuguese against the other liberation movements. For these reasons, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) did not officially grant recognition to UNITA as a liberation movement until early 1975.⁶² The Alvor Agreement finally made their position official within Angola's political constellation. Without OAU recognition, the UNHCR could not easily treat with them. Furthermore, even after the establishment of the transitional government, the UNHCR made few attempts to contact UNITA directly until they actually needed the movement's cooperation in the evacuation of several thousand Cape Verdean refugees. This lack of communication proved an obstacle later as UNITA chafed at what it perceived as a deliberate lack of interest on the part of the UN for its situation.⁶³

4. EXTERNAL POLITICAL CALCULATIONS AND THE AGENCY'S RESPONSE

To summarize, the UNHCR began to face serious constraints in Angola as their mandate did not allow them to coordinate assistance without the agreement of the three movements. As we shall see, this problem worsened as the stillborn transitional government disintegrated into civil war. Nonetheless, the agency sometimes seemed confused as to the status and relationship of the various actors. As we have seen, other UN agencies had little problem providing assistance to groups falling under the aegis of the Angolan liberation movements outside of Angola. Yet, it took the UNHCR significantly longer to agree to do so, and even then, it only provided limited assistance. The agency adopted a wait-and-see attitude towards the problem and no evidence suggests that headquarters officials seriously considered alternatives at this time. Whether feasible or not, other options were presented to them.

Indeed, in early December 1974 the MPLA suggested that all UN agencies channel their assistance directly through the respective liberation movements, even

⁶² 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 2 "Country Profile of Angola" by UNDP Regional Office for Southern Africa, 01.02.1975, p.13.

⁶³ See below.

after the establishment of a transitional government.⁶⁴ Given the level of demands by the FNLA at this point in time, something along these lines may have worked out. The FNLA would likely not have refused the proposal as it would assist them with “their” refugee population more than those influenced by the other two movements. Additionally, as noted above, Peters suggested possibly working with the Portuguese as the official interlocutor, since they remained the official sovereign authority over Angola until the declaration of independence.⁶⁵ Shortly before Angola’s official independence, the agency indeed tried this approach. However, this early in the game, they perhaps felt it unnecessary.

Despite the awareness at the UNHCR of the possible extent of the Angolan refugee crisis from at least mid-1974, it had made virtually no efforts to mobilize aid for these refugees, nor had it taken an early initiative in finding a political mechanism to facilitate assistance. Instead, it waited on events. It took a full month after the formation of the transitional government following the Alvor Agreement for the agency to send a delegation to Luanda.⁶⁶

In early 1975, many local and regional observers did not yet see civil war as inevitable.⁶⁷ Indeed, despite some early hints to the contrary, the UNHCR’s representatives also did not foresee such a conflagration. Nonetheless, the agency did not make an early effort from the time of the formation of the transitional government to mobilize concrete international and local actors to provide substantial aid to returning refugees and displaced people. Earlier action might have produced positive results. Furthermore, their lopsided contact with the principal liberation movements before the formation of the transitional government may have undermined their efforts to build some degree of consensus on refugee repatriation and the provision of assistance. As we shall see, this lack of contact caused some frictions when the agency decided to evacuate Cape Verdeans from Nova Lisboa later in the year.

⁶⁴ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with MPLA (1974-1980), Doc. 11a Cable to UNHCR Headquarters on discussions between UN agency representatives in Lusaka, sender unknown, 06.12.1974.

⁶⁵ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 55, “Note pour le dossier” from Peters, 03.02.1975.

⁶⁶ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 4 Cable from Noël to UNHCR Headquarters on Mission to Luanda, 08.04.1975.

⁶⁷ P. Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2002, 250.

Despite these possible agency missteps, one cannot overstate the enormous political sensitivity of the situation. An examination of American interest in the refugee situation highlights the importance of the issues at stake, and the potential dangers for the UNHCR.

Unbeknownst to the agency, American policymakers had also become quite interested in the Angola refugee population. Particularly, the hundreds of thousands of supposed FNLA supporters waiting to return to Angola grabbed the attention of the State Department. In March 1975, US Ambassador to Zaire, Deane Hinton took note of the situation and recommended that Washington take action on behalf of these refugees. In a telegram to the State Department, he observed, "It is, I submit, in the US interest to help Holden Roberto's FNLA to return refugees to Angola as rapidly [sic] as possible."⁶⁸ The main reason behind this lay in the fierce US desire to prevent Neto's MPLA from winning the elections agreed to at Alvor. Since the vast majority of the Angolan refugees in Zaire fell under the ostensible political control and influence of the FNLA, Hinton argued that:

Assisting the rapid return of refugees is a reasonable policy in and by itself. But it is also likely that the great majority of refugees who return from Zaire will vote FNLA. Every vote is needed to help defeat Neto. Of course, if, as I think we should, we provide transportation to the FNLA to assist in the return of refugees, it is reasonable to expect that some of these vehicles will also be used in the election campaign. This is a risk we should accept.⁶⁹

Hinton realized that the US could not simply openly aid the FNLA to the exclusion of other refugee communities. Hinton suggested that the US could avoid this problem via a public policy statement strongly emphasizing the humanitarian goals of the project. Secondly, the Americans could channel much of their assistance directly through the UN programs, particularly the UNHCR, which would provide an effective shield. They could also offer direct aid to the liberation movements themselves, including the MPLA, for the return of refugees. This would allow the US to pretend a degree of neutrality. Of course, Hinton continued:

⁶⁸ NARA Access to Archival Databases (AAD), <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-list.jsp?cat=WR43>, Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1973-1977. Telegram from US Embassy Zaire to Washington, Subject: Proposed Aid to Angolan Refugees, 20.03.1975, p. 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

It just so happens that by far the greater number of these refugees are in Zaire, perhaps 600 to 700 thousand carry FNLA identification. If the FNLA and the GOZ respond favourable [sic] to such as [sic] US offer and policy statement, as I would anticipate, we would be in business. If other governments and groups also respond, we should help them also in proportion to their lesser needs.⁷⁰ Thus, by its very nature this kind of aid would automatically favour the FNLA.

The American Consul in Luanda, Thomas Killoran, seconded Hinton's opinion. He felt that "A serious effort in Zaire to produce a flow [of] refugees southwards fits in with [the] FNLA's plans and will not only help swell its vote totals in elections scheduled for October, but may also serve to prevent the northern coffee crop from rotting on the trees for lack of laborers."⁷¹ Killoran noted, however, that the biggest obstacle to this refugee influx lay in the reticence of both the MPLA and UNITA to sanction such a return.⁷²

American policymakers examined these suggestions. After several weeks of discussion, the State Department finally rejected the more extreme idea of "producing" a refugee flow. American Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger wrote to Killoran that the US could not hide the goals of such a program and thus it would hurt both American and FNLA interests. Instead, Kissinger decided that the US should simply contribute to multilateral and international programs for refugee relief and resettlement. While this would help accomplish some of the same goals, a UNHCR "umbrella would also limit [the] risk of [the] US being politically over-exposed in [this] highly fluid situation."⁷³

Although this marks the only serious indication of American interest in the refugee situation during the lead-up to independence, it does serve to demonstrate the extreme importance of the refugee issue on the overall Angolan political scene. It also highlights the hopes that the FNLA and its allies placed on the rapid return of these refugees. These factors contributed significantly to the highly delicate political circumstances within which the UNHCR representatives had to operate.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷¹ NARA Access to Archival Databases (AAD), <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-list.jsp?cat=WR43>, Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1973-1977. Telegram from US Consulate in Luanda to Washington, Subject: Assistance to Angolan refugees, 24.03.1975.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ NARA Access to Archival Databases (AAD), <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-list.jsp?cat=WR43>, Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1973-1977. Telegram from US Secretary of State to US Embassy Kinshasa, Subject: Proposed Aid to Angolan Refugees, 12.04.1975 p. 2.

5. DEALING WITH THE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT

Nearly three weeks after the signature of the Alvor Agreement, Sadruddin Aga Khan, the High Commissioner for Refugees, addressed a telegram to the transitional government explaining that he was “ready to support consensual repatriation of refugees to Angola and to dispatch to Luanda at a convenient date high level representatives to discuss, with the competent authorities, the modalities of the repatriation, and the technical and financial support that my office can provide.”⁷⁴

In late March, Noël and Peters, along with the new programme officer for Angola, Guillermo da Cunha, visited Luanda. The mission aimed at assessing the situation and use of the initial emergency allocation of 1 million USD for the supposed 50-100,000 already repatriated refugees. Unfortunately, they encountered some of the same problems that the agency would face for the rest of the year in the country: Due to the confused situation of the transitional authority, Angolan officials could give them no guidance as to how to spend the money. Without official government sanction, the money went unspent.⁷⁵ The principal obstacle lay within the Mixed Refugee Commission provided for by the Alvor Agreement.

For instance, later in April, UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim dispatched his assistant, Abdulrahim Farah, to Luanda to evaluate the possibilities for a UN role in the transition. In a message to Aga Khan, he noted that the mixed refugee commission had not met since early March and, due to the political situation, it was unlikely to meet again soon although government officials had promised to try to get things moving.⁷⁶

However, Farah also learned that the transitional government could not use any funds appropriated for refugees until receiving and approving expenditure plans from the Health Ministry. Thus, 8 million dollars already appropriated by the transitional government remained unspent. Farah also stated that, until the mixed refugee commission could submit plans to the transitional government, an interagency mission would be useless. In perhaps the only positive development out of these early

⁷⁴ Box 221 101.GEN General Policy on Liberation Movements [Vol. 2] (1974-1975), Doc. 80 Cable from the High Commissioner to the Angolan Transitional Government, 04.02.1975 (my translation from the original French).

⁷⁵ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 4 Cable from Noël to UNHCR Headquarters on Mission to Luanda, 08.04.1975.

⁷⁶ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc.9 Cable from Farah to High Commissioner on activities in Luanda, 20.04.1975.

meetings, the Health Minister asked that the UNHCR send an official permanent representative to Angola.⁷⁷

The UNHCR complied with Abrigada's request and sent the Norwegian Oystein Opdahl to head the new a branch office there. Guillermo da Cunha, the agency's programme officer in Luanda, stayed on as Opdahl's deputy. As soon as they set up shop, however, they encountered more obstacles. Despite the tens of thousands of refugees who had returned from Zaire, the UNHCR could not begin helping them until they had received an official request from the government. As Farah had noted, and subsequent events would demonstrate, the transitional "government" could not agree to govern.

Repeated attempts over the next few months by Opdahl and da Cunha to pry properly formulated "official" requests from the mixed refugee commission proved fruitless. This hapless political situation, in which each faction had interests in preventing substantial assistance to populations seen as aligned with another movement, constituted the largest obstacles to the agency's diplomatic effort. Particularly, this affected projected assistance to the Zaire returnees, mostly located in the FNLA's zone of control. Both UNITA and the MPLA feared that facilitating the return and reintegration of these returnees would give the FNLA a massive advantage in the projected elections.⁷⁸

In late June and early July, shortly after Opdahl and da Cunha arrived, they began meeting with local NGO and church organizations who could potentially act as operational partners. However, each time they had to disappoint these organizations by explaining that the UNHCR could take no action until the mixed refugee commission had met. To each of these organizations, da Cunha and Opdahl suggested that they present assistance projects to the next mixed commission meeting.⁷⁹

On 8 July, Opdahl and da Cunha met with Lopo do Nascimento, Minister in the Presidential College of transitional government, and one of the leading figures in the MPLA. Nascimento explained the issue of the mixed refugee commission in terms of

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 27 Minutes of meeting between Opdahl and da Cunha and Angolan Health Minister and staff, 09.07.1975.

⁷⁹ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 22 Minutes of meeting between Opdahl and da Cunha and CARITAS Angola, 26.06.1975.

political problems, and did not hesitate to blame Abridada (FNLA), the Health Minister. Abridada, he said, had not attended the last meeting of the transitional government, thus no one could discuss the mixed refugee commission which fell under his purview.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, he did feel that the different liberation movements would work together to legitimize the refugee commission which would pave the way for participation by the UNHCR and other interested agencies.⁸¹

The next day, both Opdahl and da Cunha met with Abridada. They gave Abridada a presentation of the UNHCR's operations in Africa, and emphasized the fact that they were still waiting for a meeting of the mixed refugee commission. Abridada expressed surprise at the fact that, after 5 months, the agency had not done anything for the refugees in the country. He also wondered why the 1 million dollars allocated to Angola remained in Geneva despite the fact that the UNHCR had announced that the money would be at the disposition of the Angolan government.⁸²

Abridada also listed the total number of refugees as somewhere around 1.5 million, of which 400,000 had already returned to the North, East, and South of the country. He considered these numbers as the highest in Africa and didn't understand why the UNHCR had not yet taken the initiative to help these suffering Angolans.⁸³

Opdahl responded that this represented "an inexact interpretation of the facts" since the UNHCR could not act without an official request by the government, via the mixed refugee commission.⁸⁴ Abridada replied rather despondently that he spoke to them as a member of the Government and not as a member of a liberation movement. Exasperated and not wanting to get mired in an endless debate over Abridada's legal authority, the UNHCR representatives let Abridada change the subject of the conversation.

Abridada did admit that the principal political difficulties surrounding the functioning of the mixed refugee commission resulted from the fact that the refugees returning to the North were sympathisers, for the most part, of the FNLA. This reduced the incentive of the other liberation movements to help the commission operate.

⁸⁰ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 28, Meeting between Opdahl and da Cunha and Lopo do Nascimento, 08.07.1975.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 27 Minutes of meeting between Opdahl and da Cunha and Angolan Health Minister and staff, 09.07.1975 p. 1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

Overall, Opdahl and da Cunha got a clear impression from the meeting that the prospects for the Mixed Refugee Commission remained dim. Da Cunha wrote that, “Through his way of acting, the Minister did not give us the impression of being optimistic as to the functioning of the National Refugee Commission.”⁸⁵

The course of this meeting well highlights the political issues that the UNHCR confronted in Angola. First, the mixed refugee commission could not function due to serious political differences. Second, the issue of representativeness and legal authority in the government itself was open to question.

Within the week it became clear that further cooperation between the liberation movements was unlikely. Large-scale fighting between them erupted throughout Angola during this time.⁸⁶ Soon, the MPLA had managed to expel the FNLA from Luanda, and the latter managed to do the same to the MPLA presence in the north.⁸⁷ Although the FNLA mounted an offensive towards Luanda, MPLA counterattacks managed to capture important towns farther east and secure control over the Cabinda enclave.⁸⁸ During the heavy fighting in Luanda, Opdahl and da Cunha, along with other international UN staff took refuge with the UNDP.⁸⁹

By mid-August, the Portuguese High Commissioner called a meeting with the military leaders of the liberation movements, during which it was decided that the FNLA would evacuate its forces from the neighbourhoods where government officials were living. 500 FNLA soldiers were escorted by Portuguese troops to Ambrizete, a coastal city in the north of the country. However, some 450 FNLA troops who were originally part of the “integrated forces” called for in the Alvor agreement remained entrenched in the city. UNITA also decided to evacuate its forces.⁹⁰

The Portuguese concentrated most of their forces around Luanda and Nova Lisboa where most of their own citizens who wanted to evacuate were located. Nova-Lisboa contained some 30,000 Portuguese refugees, who had just begun evacuation

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 2 (author’s translation from the original French).

⁸⁶ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Docs. 29-38 (from 15.07.1975 to 01.08.1975) detailing fighting and situation in Luanda, most from UNDP.

⁸⁷ Marcum, 260-261.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 261-262.

⁸⁹ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 29 Cable from UNDP Rep Balcazar to New York on UN staff situation in Luanda, 15.04.1975.

⁹⁰ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 43, “Note pour le dossier: Situation en Angola,” from P. Dos Anjos, 13.08.1975 p. 1.

operations. Agostinho Neto, the President of the MPLA stated around this time that a unilateral declaration of independence could be declared depending on the situation.⁹¹

This fighting and separation of forces effectively marked the end of the transitional government as a coherent interlocutor, if indeed it ever counted as one. Without a governmental partner, the UNHCR could do little in terms of assistance operations. However, one option for UNHCR assistance did present itself.

6. CAPE VERDEAN REFUGEES

Repatriation and resettlement of Angolans did not constitute Angola's only refugee problem. Apart from increasingly large numbers of Portuguese and white Angolans who wished to leave Angola and fell under Portuguese responsibility, nearly 40,000 Cape Verdeans lived in the country. Even before the formal July independence of Cape Verde from Portugal in July, a representative from the PAIGC (*Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde*), the country's liberation movement, met with UNHCR officials in Geneva. The PAIGC's Cape Verde foreign relations chief, Corsino Tolentino, met with Antoine Noël to discuss the movement's growing fear for the safety of Cape Verdean living in Angola.⁹² According to Tolentino, this community had become increasingly threatened by the FNLA who considered the Cape Verdeans as MPLA sympathizers. Particularly this had to do with the close relationship between the MPLA and the PAIGC. Many Cape Verdeans living in Luanda had seen their houses destroyed and property pillaged. They had since moved to centers for displaced people in safer parts of the city. Tolentino explained that the economy of Cape Verde could not support the repatriation of tens of thousands of returnees, and hoped that the UNHCR could prevail upon the Angolan transitional authorities to guarantee the security of Cape Verdeans living there. However, in case of a massive return, Tolentino requested that the UNHCR provide assistance in planning for such an eventuality.⁹³

Indeed, in early June, the Portuguese High Commissioner informed the UNHCR that FNLA militants had threatened Cape Verdeans living in Luanda.⁹⁴ In late

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹² Box 233 101.17 Policy on Liberation Movements—Relations with PAIGC (Parti africain pour l'indépendance de la Guinée et des Iles du Cap-Vert) (1974-1976), Doc. 7 Memorandum from Noël to Homann-Herimberg, « Rapatriement des réfugiés du Cap-Vert » 10.06.1975 p .2.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

June, da Cunha met with the local commission representing the Cape Verdean displaced to examine their situation.⁹⁵ He visited a reception center for some 400 displaced people, and noted their dire living conditions. He also observed that some had lost their jobs and still felt threatened. The commission felt that repatriating some of them would significantly calm the mood, and asked the UNHCR for assistance.⁹⁶

As the transitional government fell apart during the fighting in July and August, the UNHCR essentially lost its chosen interlocutor. The plight of the Cape Verdeans worsened, with some 30,000 streaming into Luanda from other parts of the country. During a 25 August phone call, Kurt Waldheim told Aga Khan that the Portuguese felt that the Cape Verdeans required more immediate assistance than those refugees returning from Zaire.⁹⁷ Although Aga Khan thought that placing Cape Verdeans in host countries could prove difficult, the Cape Verde issue finally presented the agency with an opportunity to accomplish something on the ground.⁹⁸

Even this would prove difficult, as the disintegration of the transitional government and the outbreak of full scale civil war rendered the UNHCR's position politically delicate. During a 10 September meeting between MPLA minister Lopo do Nascimento and Opdahl, Nascimento explained that the Transitional Government still existed, although the FNLA ministers had been removed.⁹⁹ Since no quorum remained in the Presidential Council, the authority to issue decrees and publish new legislation now temporarily passed to the Portuguese High Commissioner. Nascimento also said that he did not think that the UNHCR could do anything for the "returnees" but that there was great need for assisting the "displaced persons" in the country, especially in the agricultural domain.¹⁰⁰ Opdahl had the impression that the "returnees" referred to the repatriates in Northern Angola, and that the MPLA did not want the UNHCR to assist them. However, Nascimento did support the agency's idea of repatriating Cape Verdeans.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 2] (1975-1984), Doc. 71 Note attached to Memorandum for UNHCR's Central and West Africa Section, "Conférence au sommet des trois mouvements de libération de l'Angola (FNLA, MPLA et UNITA), à Nakuru (Kenya) du 16 au 21 juin 1975), 23.06.1975, p. 2.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹⁷ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc.48, High Commissioner's Note for the File, "Angola--Telephone Conversation with the Secretary-General on 25 August 1975, 18.00 hrs," 28.08.1975.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 2] (1975), Doc. 58 Cable from Opdahl to Peters on meeting with Lopo do Nascimento, 12.09.1975.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* (in quotes in text).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

In early September, Opdahl and da Cunha visited FNLA controlled territory in and around the northern Angolan city of Carmona to assess the situation of the returnees from Zaire.¹⁰² There, they met with a number of FNLA officials, including former MPLA cadre Daniel Chipenda who had now joined the movement. The FNLA Interior Minister, Ngola Kabangu suggested that UNHCR work directly through the FNLA to deliver assistance. Of course, Opdahl explained the problems with this from the agency's point of view. Nonetheless, this visit sparked a negative reaction from both of the other liberation movements who viewed the UNHCR's interest in the North with suspicion.

Several days later, Opdahl had a contentious meeting with Garcia Neto, the head of MPLA foreign relations and member of the refugee commission. Neto, clearly angered by UNHCR interest in the North, stated that the government could not control the north and that the UNHCR had to choose between the government and the movements, not both. He felt that it should work with the government in Luanda. He said that the FNLA would use any assistance meant for refugees in the north for its armed forces, such as the food stocked by the Minister of Agriculture. He also stated that the FNLA would confiscate anything anyway, regardless of the distributing agency. When Opdahl highlighted a school project proposed by the Bishop of Carmona, he asked "Who can say whether these schools and their instructors will teach the children Portuguese or teach Portuguese to the Zairian soldiers brought in by the FNLA who we have found with textbooks for the study of Portuguese?"¹⁰³ He then asked whether the Bishop wanted to supplant the Ministry of Education. He also alleged that several "so-called" humanitarian organizations, including churches, actually worked for the FNLA.¹⁰⁴ Any UNHCR activity would be regarded as interference in the internal affairs of the government. Opdahl noted that this exchange highlighted the political climate he had to deal with. In a fit of frustration, he then told Neto that he had come to find out whether the UNHCR could do anything at all and since there were apparently only two options, he would have to study the issue.¹⁰⁵ It now appeared that the MPLA identified itself and its interests as those of the transitional government. The possibility that the UNHCR could accomplish anything in this kind of political climate seemed grim.

¹⁰² 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 52 Cable from Opdahl to Peters on mission to Carmona, 07.09.1975.

¹⁰³ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 2] (1975), Doc. 71 Cable from Opdahl to UNHCR Headquarters on meeting with Garcia Neto, 17.09.1975 p.1.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

Thus, despite having invoked the possibility as far back as January, the UNHCR finally began to explore an agreement with the Portuguese authorities permitting the agency to provide assistance. On 12 September, Opdahl met with the Portuguese High Commissioner, Admiral Leonel Cardoso. Cardoso wanted to establish a formal bilateral agreement covering agency assistance between the UNHCR and himself which he would communicate to the transitional government and the movements. The bilateral agreement would be followed by tripartite agreements with operational partners. Cardoso explained that he was in the best position to present this to the liberation movements. He also declared his willingness to use his authority to ensure the agreements' implementation.¹⁰⁶

The UNHCR and the Portuguese authorities never implemented an agreement due to the proximity of the upcoming independence date in November. Nevertheless, the fact that they discussed such an agreement and considered it feasible does illustrate a possible alternative approach that the agency might have undertaken earlier in the year. Indeed, they had even discussed the possibility back in March with Holden Roberto.¹⁰⁷

Of course, the agency did not, and at this point the main issue became the fate of the Cape Verdeans. This situation offered a chance to exercise delicate diplomacy in order to rescue thousands of people. Fortunately, the MPLA, despite its newfound antagonism to the UNHCR and its activities noted above, agreed that the agency "could" help the Cape Verdeans. Additionally, the Portuguese tried to push the UNHCR in this direction. In early September, the acting High Commissioner, General Macedo, informed Opdahl and da Cunha that the Cape Verdeans constituted his most urgent priority.¹⁰⁸

Geneva decided that it could indeed act within a good offices framework to help them.¹⁰⁹ Opdahl believed that the some 4,000 Cape Verdeans located in the region around the isolated city of Nova Lisboa, in UNITA controlled territory, could evacuate through UNHCR auspices. Opdahl felt that:

¹⁰⁶ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 2] (1975), Doc. 62 Cable from Opdahl to Peters on discussions with Admiral Leonel Cardoso, the Portuguese High Commissioner in Angola, 15.09.1975.

¹⁰⁷ Box 223 101.3 Policy on Liberation Movements-Relations with FNLA [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc. 55, "Note pour le dossier" from Peters, 03.02.1975.

¹⁰⁸ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc.50, Cable from Opdahl to Geneva on Meeting with acting Portuguese High Commissioner, 05.09.1975.

¹⁰⁹ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 1] (1974-1975), Doc.55 Cable to UNHCR Regional Representative, New York, Virendra Dayal, from UNHCR, Geneva on Opdahl's mission, 10.09.1975, p.2.

[...] the Cape Verde question gives us an excellent opportunity to make our presence felt in the country and legitimately in all areas. We have to negotiate with UNITA and FNLA and the MPLA has stated that they believe it is good if we can help the Cape Verde group. It is possible that we can establish ourselves as a humanitarian body through this action (if it decided that we should participate) and that we could establish contacts which might be useful later.¹¹⁰

However, these negotiations ran into difficulties, partly caused by the UNHCR's lopsided engagement with the liberation movements in the past. Most of the Cape Verdeans who had not yet fled to Luanda, remained concentrated in the region of Nova Lisboa (now Huambo) deep in the interior of the country. As noted above, this region served as the principal base and capital for UNITA. In mid-September, the UNDP flew relief supplies to Nova Lisboa.

However, upon arrival, UNITA refused the delivery as soon as they found out that these supplies originated with the UN. UNITA representatives complained that no one in the UN system had yet approached them and shown interest in their particular humanitarian issues. Particularly, UNITA made reference to the UNHCR's relations with the FNLA and its visit to northern Angola earlier in the month. They questioned the balanced approach of both the UNHCR and the UN system in general.

Thus, Opdahl and da Cunha flew to Nova Lisboa in order to both inform UNITA of UNHCR activities, and to win their assistance in the evacuation of the Cape Verdeans. The two agency representatives found an alarming situation when they arrived. On 20 September, Jonas Savimbi, UNITA's charismatic leader, declared in a speech to a large gathering in Nova Lisboa that Europeans should leave Angola, and that this included "other foreigners like the people from other former Portuguese colonies."¹¹¹ Since the Portuguese military had not included the vast majority of Cape Verdeans in their evacuation plans, Opdahl noted that he had "absolutely no doubt" as to the precarious and threatened condition of this group.¹¹² To make matters worse, the Portuguese had advanced their withdrawal date from Nova Lisboa to 6 October,

¹¹⁰ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 2] (1975), Doc. 85A3 "Strictly Confidential" hand courier from Opdahl to UNHCR Headquarters, "Various aspects of the actual situation in Angola," 23.09.1975 p.6.

¹¹¹ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 2] (1975), Doc. 83, Cable from Opdahl to UNHCR Headquarters on mission to Nova Lisboa, 22.09.1975, p.1.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

little more than two weeks away. The UNHCR would have to act extremely rapidly in order to facilitate the evacuation of all the Cape Verdeans who wished to go. Opdahl also met with UNITA representatives in order to discuss agency relations with the movement. As described above, the UNHCR had hardly made any substantial contacts with UNITA after the Portuguese coup. Their refusal to accept UN supplies sent a clear signal that they required attention. However, when Opdahl and da Cunha met the UNITA Ministers of Education and Labor, they did manage to get the message across and Opdahl felt that the ministers “fully appreciated the way we had to work.”¹¹³

Upon his return, Opdahl immediately contacted the PAIGC representatives in Luanda and requested that they send representatives to Nova Lisboa in order to concentrate the Cape Verdean population spread around the area.¹¹⁴ Opdahl noted to headquarters that he understood approximately 30-40 percent of the Cape Verdeans would try to stay, even after Savimbi’s speech.¹¹⁵ However, this still meant that, in the Nova Lisboa region, some 2,500 Cape Verdeans might want to leave.¹¹⁶

As the Portuguese had set the deadline for their final withdrawal from Nova Lisboa for 6 October, Opdahl and da Cunha had mere days to act. After wrangling with Geneva over the chartering of flights, and over Geneva’s insistence that one of the two remain behind in Luanda, Opdahl set off alone.¹¹⁷ The situation became even more critical when the Portuguese decided to again move up their final departure date from Nova Lisboa to 4 October.¹¹⁸

Due to the situation in the region, Opdahl required a military escort, and managed to procure one from UNITA. With this settled, and the evacuees from Nova Lisboa assembled and registered, Opdahl organized a convoy to drive into the bush to pick up evacuees located in the surrounding region.¹¹⁹ Opdahl recounted that his “safari” lasted over 26 hours and covered more than 500 kilometers. His convoy had to navigate narrow, hilly, and sometimes unpaved roads in weather conditions which made it nearly impossible for the heavier vehicles to drive in some places. In addition

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹⁵ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 2] (1975), Doc. 85A3 “Strictly Confidential” hand courier from Opdahl to UNHCR Headquarters, “Various aspects of the actual situation in Angola,” 23.09.1975 p.7.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹⁷ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 2] (1975) Docs, 94-114, 25.09.1975-30.09.1975.

¹¹⁸ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 2] (1975) Doc. 123 Cable from da Cunha to UNHCR Headquarters, 2.10.1975.

¹¹⁹ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 2] (1975), Doc. 128 Cable from Opdahl to UNHCR HQ on Cape Verdean evacuation operation from Nova Lisboa, 06.10.1975, p.1.

to these inconveniences, more dangers compounded his mission. Since much of his trip occurred at night and took him through areas that UNITA considered sensitive, his convoy had a difficult time at a number of checkpoints, despite his UNITA military escorts. Fortunately for Opdahl, Jonas Savimbi, UNITA's leader, took a personal interest in his convoy's safety, and even spoke to Opdahl by phone upon his return to Nova Lisboa. Opdahl took this as a good sign for potential future cooperation as UNITA seemed then to have resolved its apparent issues with the UN.¹²⁰

However, one serious incident did mar the UNHCR evacuation operation. A UNITA soldier arrested and raped two Cape Verdean girls. Although Opdahl managed to free the girls and other prisoners, this incident did highlight the potential dangers that awaited any foreigners remaining in Nova Lisboa after the Portuguese evacuation. By the time the operation had ended, Opdahl had managed to organize the evacuation 826 Cape Verdeans to Cape Verde, and 126 to Luanda where they would evacuate with the other Cape Verdeans in that city later on.¹²¹

7. ENDGAME AND CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, the evacuation of the Cape Verdeans from Nova Lisboa was the only significant action taken by the UNHCR in Angola before its formal independence on 11 November. The political situation continued to deteriorate, and the advent of foreign intervention made UN activity all but impossible until the situation stabilized several months later.

By October it seemed the MPLA had gained the upper hand due to its better organization and discipline.¹²² However, this military superiority soon came under threat when, on 14 October, South African troops invaded Angola in support of UNITA (and, to a lesser extent the FNLA).¹²³ Within a month, the South African column had pushed up the coast, sweeping MPLA units away, and had reached the coastal city of Novo Redondo.¹²⁴ At the same time, the US continuously supplied the FNLA and Zaire with weapons and equipment aimed at facilitating their fight against the MPLA. The 11 November independence date passed practically without ceremony. The last Portuguese forces withdrew the previous day, and the fighting continued as fiercely as

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹²² Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution Volume II*, 263.

¹²³ Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 300.

¹²⁴ Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution Volume II*, 263.

ever. However, the South African intervention began to backfire as it became public. Countries initially reticent about recognizing the MPLA government began to do so as UNITA and the FNLA had discredited themselves through their associations with South Africa.¹²⁵

During this time, Opdahl and da Cunha desperately tried to pursue a formal agreement with the Portuguese authorities to deliver assistance to needy populations, especially the returnees from Zaire. Such an agreement would only provide political cover for the UNHCR in the absence of any kind of transitional government to sign an agreement. However, such cover would allow the agency to pursue the kinds of aid operations that it could not do in the previous months.¹²⁶ Although the Portuguese expressed complete willingness to thus facilitate the UNHCR's task, the agency finally decided against such an agreement as it threatened to "tie our hands regarding operational partners."¹²⁷

Thus, both lacking a legal mechanism, and overwhelmed by the burgeoning conflict in the country, the UNHCR and other UN organs in Angola began to evacuate. With the UNDP set to leave in early November, Opdahl persisted in finding an assistance role for the UNHCR.¹²⁸ The agency instructed him to stay "unobtrusively" in Luanda as long as possible.¹²⁹ However, the agency worried that, by independence, Opdahl might become the last remaining representative of the United Nations in Angola. The agency decided that in this context, Opdahl could not remain "unobtrusive" after all.¹³⁰ It felt that certain liberation movements and political forces would interpret a UNHCR presence after independence as a de facto recognition of the MPLA government in Luanda. This could have potentially threatened the agency's continued desire to provide assistance to the some 400,000 refugees in the north of the country under FNLA control.¹³¹ On 18 November, the UNHCR recalled Opdahl from Luanda.¹³²

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 272.

¹²⁶ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 3] (1975-1976), Doc. 152 Cable from Opdahl to UNHCR Headquarters on meeting with Portuguese High Commissioner, 28.10.1975 p.1.

¹²⁷ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 3] (1975-1976), Doc. 165 Cable from UNHCR Headquarters to Opdahl, 31.10.1975.

¹²⁸ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 3] (1975-1976), Doc. 152 Cable from Opdahl to UNHCR Headquarters on meeting with Portuguese High Commissioner, 28.10.1975 p.2.

¹²⁹ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 3] (1975-1976), Doc. 177 Cable from New York to Geneva, 06.11.1975.

¹³⁰ 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 3] (1975-1976), Doc. 180 Cable from Geneva to New York, 06.11.1975.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³² 100.ANG.GEN Refugees in Angola [Vol. 3] (1975-1976), Doc. 221 Note pour le Haut Commissaire on the recent evolution of the situation in Angola, 09.02.1976 p.1.

By late October and early November, several thousand Cuban troops began pouring into Angola to bolster the MPLA.¹³³ Cuban forces shattered attacking FNLA units from the north, and their chaotic and undisciplined retreat back to Zaire contributed the ultimate marginalization of that movement.¹³⁴ With the destruction of the FNLA and dogged Cuban and MPLA resistance, the South African advance came to a halt.¹³⁵ Desperate pleas from Savimbi for South Africa to maintain its troop presence fell on deaf ears as the apartheid state realized that its intervention had backfired politically. In December, the US Congress passed the “Clark Amendment” to the Arms Export Control Act which prohibited the US government from giving further aid to any Angolan groups.¹³⁶ This helped to effectively isolate South Africa, and by mid-January 1976, it began to withdraw its troops.¹³⁷ Meanwhile, a short-lasting “government” set up by the FNLA and UNITA fell apart in partisan squabbles. On 11 February, the MPLA government finally received enough recognition by fellow African states that the OAU admitted Angola as a member state.¹³⁸

This article has not covered UNHCR operations in Angola after 1975 since it primarily aims at examining how the organization dealt with non-state armed groups in the middle of a volatile conflict situation. Indeed, from formal independence in 11 November until the MPLA’s overwhelming military victory over its adversaries and its recognition by the OAU, the UN and its affiliated agencies would not provide any kind of assistance. Only in late February 1976, the MPLA/government of Angola addressed a request to the UNHCR for assistance to the vast numbers of displaced people within its territory and refugees wishing to return from without. By the middle of the year, Kurt Waldheim designated the UNHCR as the coordinating agency for the UN’s humanitarian efforts in the country.¹³⁹

Nevertheless, one could ultimately describe the agency’s experience in Angola in 1975 as a failure. Apart from the Cape Verdeans, the agency proved unable to provide assistance returning refugees. Much of this had to do with the difficult conditions in which it and its representatives had to operate. The burning question of

¹³³ Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions* 305-308.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 308-311.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 316-317.

¹³⁶ Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution Volume II*, 278.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹³⁹ 110.ANG Programming-Angola [Vol. 1] (1976-1977), Doc 1a, Rapport annuel du bureau du HCR en Angola, 02.02.1977, p.9.

legitimacy, combined with civil war made the provision of assistance to both returning refugees and displaced people almost impossible.

However, this does not mean that the agency could not have done better. Despite foreseeing a major refugee crisis in mid-1974, the agency did not develop significant contingency plans, and preferred to let the liberation movements make contact rather than taking the initiative themselves. Instead of aiding the movements, especially the FNLA, to develop properly formulated assistance requests, the agency waited for months, without making an active effort to assess the situation in detail themselves. Relations and communications with its representatives suffered, perhaps due to confusion at the top over actions and policy.

On a number of occasions agency officials, particularly its local representatives in Luanda, advocated alternative options aiming at bypassing the inoperative transitional government. The idea of working through the movements rather than the government, or covering assistance with official Portuguese authority, arose in many discussions. Yet, no one in a position of authority seriously entertained these options until too late in the game. While the agency's local representatives seized upon the opportunity to rescue hundreds of Cape Verdeans isolated in Nova Lisboa, other, similar opportunities may have slipped by due to lack of agency preparation.

Part of this simply has to do with the nature of an organization as geographically widespread as the UNHCR. Unlike officials in the field, headquarters personnel were closer and more attuned to donor concerns and the broader politics of refugee assistance. The agency felt that it had to maintain its non-political mandate at all costs. Assisting one faction or another in the provision of refugee assistance could benefit affected populations in the short term, but might seriously undermine future agency programs in the medium and long terms. This could pose potentially incalculable consequences for the international refugee assistance regime. While this certainly provided no comfort to those in immediate need of assistance, it remains an important consideration.

These observations should also not obscure the immense obstacles to effective refugee assistance posed by the conflict between the liberation movements. At this point in its history, the agency was simply not equipped to handle the kind of fluid and politically sensitive situation which it confronted in Angola in 1974 and 1975. It had had little experience dealing with non-state actors in this kind of a conflict

setting. Nonetheless, if anything, this experience illustrates a good faith, if not faultless, effort on the part of the agency to go outside the scope of its traditional relations and engage actors then- traditionally found on the margins of international diplomacy. Unfortunately for the UNHCR, the situation proved too much to handle.

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