

April 3, 1977

Fidel Castro's 1977 Southern Africa Tour: A Report to Honecker (excerpt)

Citation:

"Fidel Castro's 1977 Southern Africa Tour: A Report to Honecker (excerpt)", April 3, 1977, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Stiftung "Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der ehemaligen DDR im Bundesarchiv" (Berlin), DY30 JIV 2/201/1292; document obtained by Christian F. Ostermann; translated by David Welch with revisions by Ostermann. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112142>

Summary:

The following excerpt--from a discussion on 3 April 1977 at the House of the SED Central Committee in East Berlin--contains Castro's impressions of the situations in several southern African countries, (e.g., Tanzania, Angola, Mozambique, People's Republic of the Congo), and several guerrilla or liberation groups in the region, such as the African National Congress (ANC), then struggling for power in South Africa, and two groups fighting to rule Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African Political Union (ZAPU). Also included are Castro's assessments of individual political leaders, remarks about coordination with Moscow, and an over-all conclusion that Africa was the place to inflict a major blow against world imperialism.

Original Language:

German

Contents:

Translation - English

Minutes of the conversation between Comrade Erich Honecker and Comrade Fidel Castro, Sunday, 3 April 1977 between 11:00 and 13:30 and 15:45 and 18:00, House of the Central Committee, Berlin.

Participants: Comrades Hermann Axen, Werner Lamberz, Paul Verner, Paul Markowski (with Comrades Edgar Fries and Karlheinz Mobus as interpreters), Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, Osmany Cienfuegos, Raul Valdez Vivo, Jose Abrantes

[Honecker welcomes Castro, invites him to take the floor--ed.]

Fidel Castro: [sections omitted--ed.]

We visited Tanzania because of an old commitment. We have built three schools there, sent a medical brigade, and given help in other ways. Nyerere had invited us to talk about economic matters above all. The rise in oil prices had affected Tanzania tremendously. Tanzania needs 800,000 tons of oil a year. The entire harvest of peanut, sisal and cotton crops has to be used for the purchase of oil. The Chinese are still present in Tanzania. They have built a few things there, in particular the railroad. The armed units of the ZANU are trained by the Chinese. Tanzania also carries some responsibility for the split of the liberation movement of Zimbabwe into ZANU and ZAPU. In South Africa armed fighting has begun.

The ANC fighters are trained in Angola. The Chinese had also offered training here. Tanzania considers the developments in Zimbabwe in terms of prestige. [Its involvement] allows it to negotiate with Great Britain and the United States over Zimbabwe and to define a role for itself.

The ZANU has 5000 men in fighting units trained by the Chinese. The liberation fighters in Namibia are also trained in Angola, however. Cuba and the Soviet Union have both set up training camps for this purpose. The ZAPU is supported by Angola.

We flew directly from Tanzania to Mozambique. There used to be differences between us and the FRELIMO, going back to the times when FRELIMO was in Tanzania and Che Guevara had spoken to [Mozambique Liberation Front head Eduardo] Mondlane there. At the time Mondlane did not agree with Che and said so publicly. Thereafter news articles against Mondlane were published in Cuba. Later Mondlane corrected himself, but only internally and things remained somewhat up in the air. FRELIMO took good positions during the liberation struggle in Angola. But in our opinion they were not sufficiently combative. For a time FRELIMO got close to [Tanzanian President Julius] Nyerere. [Cuban Vice President] Carlos Rafael [Rodriguez] had spoken to [Mozambican President] Samora Machel in Colombo[, Sri Lanka, at the Nonaligned Summit Conference in August 1976]. After that we sent a Cuban delegation to Mozambique and I was invited to visit. FRELIMO accepted all of our suggestions for the visit. It was kept discreet, which was convenient for me. Samora Machel was really a surprise for me. I learned to know him as an intelligent revolutionary who took clear positions and had a good relationship with the masses. He really impressed me. We spoke with each other for one and a half days. We support Mozambique. Machel asked us to send 300 technicians. He was interested in Cuba's experiences, especially economic ones. Before this we did not know for sure what influence the Chinese had on him. Now he is getting closer to the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. He got a loan from the Soviets for weapons of 100 million rubles. In particular, the Soviets deliver aircraft and anti-aircraft batteries. We were very pleased with our visit to Mozambique. I want to say that we consider this very important.

[Zambian President Kenneth] Kaunda also wanted me to visit him. I had been in Africa for a long time, however, and did not want to extend my stay. Besides which the imperialist penetration has advanced far in Zambia. In the Angola matter, Zambia took a very wrong position, in spite of the fact that she was not forced to do so. We had agreed with Angola not to visit Zambia. A few days before my visit to southern Africa the Katanga [Shaba] battles had begun and [People's Republic of the Congo President Marien] N'Gouabi was murdered. I had been invited to Madagascar, but did not want to stay in Africa any longer. During a press conference in Dar Es Salaam I had categorically denied that Cuba was in any way involved in the Katanga battles. I explained that the situation in Angola was different from those in Zimbabwe and Namibia. I had answered all questions in very general terms.

Things are going well in Angola. They achieved good progress in their first year of independence. There's been a lot of building and they are developing health facilities. In 1976 they produced 80,000 tons of coffee. Transportation means are also being developed. Currently between 200,000 and 400,000 tons of coffee are still in warehouses. In our talks with [Angolan President Agostinho] Neto we stressed the absolute necessity of achieving a level of economic development comparable to what had existed under [Portuguese] colonialism. Over 300 Cubans are working in the health system. Fishing is recovering and the sugar plantations are almost all back in production. The reconstruction of the transport system is to be completed within 6 months. In education a lot is being done as well. The MPLA [Movement for the Popular Liberation of Angola] is doing a good job with mass organizing. Women are politically very active. There are no grounds for dissatisfaction there. Angola has good hard currency earnings. Oil revenues are about 500 million dollars a year, without them having to do anything. They also generate about 300 million from coffee. Now they are setting up a Party in Angola. The fundamental decisions in domestic and foreign policy are correct. We are still concerned about one area: the development of the Army. The Defense Ministry is doing hardly anything to fight bandits in the north and south of the country. The bands are particularly active in the center of the country. With our help they could deliver heavy blows against them. The Soviet military advisors are active at the highest levels. Our advisers are active at the Brigade level and we are helping them with the training of military cadres and the fight against the bandits. The Angolan Defense Ministry underestimates the fight against the bandits [and] they are not deploying regular troops against the bandits. We understand that the Soviet military advisers are primarily requested to help them to organize the regular army and are not interested in helping in the fight against bandits. It is difficult for us to fight against the bandits on our own. Our comrades have had a lot of difficulties and have spent many bitter hours fighting them. The Cubans cannot do it alone. The state of the army unsettles us. In one region a brigade has been without a commander or chief of staff for a long time. Until now the Cuban units have been the only ones fighting the bandits. The major share must however be carried out by the Angolans themselves. The Cuban troops are above all concentrated in Cabinda and in the defense of the capital, Luanda. I spoke with Neto about the situation of the army and told him that things had to change. The Defense Minister [Cdr. Iko Teles Carreira--ed.] is a good old fighter with the MPLA, but that hasn't helped. An army general staff does not really exist. The country may have 70,000 men under arms but the army is practically not organized. The Soviet advisers are primarily concerned with planning. Neto wanted us to take the entire army in hand. In practical terms that might have been the best solution, but not politically. The Soviet Union is the chief weapons supplier and the Angolans must speak directly to the Soviets. Neto himself must solve these problems. We also cannot commit our troops to the fight against bandits because women and children are being killed in these battles and we cannot take on such a responsibility.

Neto made a very good impression. He is an outstanding personality, very clever and decisive. He is increasingly the leading figure in the Angolan leadership. There are also opportunists in Angola, however. Sometimes they try to approach us or the Soviets and to spread certain opinions. We are very clearly taking a line in favor of Agostinho Neto. There is also evidence of black racism in Angola. Some are using the hatred against the colonial masters for negative purposes. There are many mulattos and whites in Angola. Unfortunately, racist feelings are spreading very quickly. Neto

has taken a balanced position here, naming both whites and mulattos as ministers. Neto is of course ready to contribute to this question decisively. He is open to suggestions and arguments. The Defense Minister is not as strong. He does not have high standards. Because of this a lot of cadres do not have the right attitudes. There are cases in which the military commanders have not visited their military district for five months. Many ministers were appointed because they were old war comrades of Neto's. A fact remains: the army and general staff are not working properly. Cadres overall are being developed well throughout Angola, but the Army is the most important. Things are going well, with the exception of the army.

We are giving Angola a great deal of military support. At the end of the liberation war, 36,000 Cuban troops and 300 tanks were deployed. The South African mercenaries were quickly demoralized. The USA talks about 12,000 Cuban soldiers. We are reducing our troop strength continuously. This year we plan to leave 15,000 men stationed there. By the end of 1978 there should be only 7,000, although it's probable that the reductions won't proceed quite as rapidly. The main force is stationed in the south. If the Cuban military were not deployed in Angola the situation would be a lot more complicated.

The number of our civilian advisers and experts will rise to 4,000 this year. Until now this aid has been provided free of charge. Starting in 1977, however, Angola is committed to paying for the living expenses of our specialists, with an additional increase in financial responsibilities scheduled for 1978. Our military aid will remain free of charge. The Soviet Union has committed itself to supplying the entire material needs of the Angolan and our units.

While in Angola I also dealt with the question of the liberation movements in Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Namibia's liberation fighters are good, they are also helping Angola with the anti-bandit battles. The South African ANC is a serious organization. Its president, Oliver Tambo, is a serious politician. Three quarters of the ANC Central Committee membership is communist. They have a very clear political position with regards to Angola, the Soviet Union, and other socialist countries. The people have taken up the struggle in South Africa, in time the ANC will be a serious power.

The situation is most complicated in Zimbabwe. The ZANU have 1,000 armed fighters. The Chinese and Nyerere are influential with the ZANU. The ZAPU, however, haven't had any military forces of their own. The best man in the ZAPU, General Secretary [Jason] Moyo, was murdered [in Zambia in January 1977]. During the Angolan war of liberation, the Angolan leadership could not give its support to the liberation movement in Zimbabwe. At the time Mozambique was leaning against Tanzania and supported the ZANU. Today things are different. Angola's influence is increasing and Mozambique is growing closer and closer to Angola. The Patriotic Front in Zimbabwe is made up of both the ZANU and the ZAPU, but this is only a formality. [ZAPU leader Joshua] Nkomo is supported by Angola, the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries. [ZANU leader Robert] Mugabe is supported by Tanzania and the Chinese. Now there are possibilities for depriving the Chinese and the Tanzanians of their influence in Zimbabwe. Zambia is supporting the Zimbabwean liberation movement for the prestige factor that's involved and because it wants to counteract Angola's influence with Nkomo. With the positive development of Angola and Mozambique the prospects of the liberation movement in Zimbabwe can only improve. It is possible that Angola, Mozambique and Zambia will move forward together. The ZAPU must establish its own armed forces as soon as possible. There are today 6,000 ZAPU men in Angola, and one could make an Army out of them. That would facilitate uniting the ZAPU and the ZANU. I told Neto about this and he agreed. Above all that would be a way to roll back China's influence. Nkomo also understands this. He is very intelligent and talks to Samora Machel a great deal. Unfortunately he is very fat, and so his health is not good.

I told him and others that the personal safety of all the liberation leaders was in danger. The imperialists would be moved to try and murder them all. They've already

murdered N'Gouabi and Moyo. Because of this it is absolutely necessary to take steps to increase security measures for the leaders.

The liberation struggle in Africa has a great future. From a historical perspective the facts are that the imperialists cannot turn things back. The liberation struggle is the most moral thing in existence. If the socialist states take the right positions, they could gain a lot of influence. Here is where we can strike heavy blows against the imperialists. The liberation army in Katanga [Shaba] is led by a general. These people used to favor Katanga's secession from Zaire. Later they went to Angola, were trained by the Portuguese and fought against the MPLA, until they went over to Neto's side; now they could not fall out with Neto. They are good soldiers. Its military leader is a general in the gendarmerie who now wants to make a revolution in Zaire. These people are now saying that they are good Marxist-Leninists and that they no longer advocate the secession of Katanga. They went off in four different directions with four battalions. We didn't know about this, and we think that the Angolans didn't either. The frontline states were split 50/50 in favor of supporting the Katanga liberation movement. We gave them a categorical explanation that Cuba was in no way involved in this. The armed groups are marching forward. Their commander sends an open [public] daily telegram to the Angolan leadership and to the Soviet and Cuban embassies in Luanda describing his advances and asking for support. The Yankees are wavering. They know very well that there are no Cuban units involved. Carlos Rafael Rodriguez is charged with speaking to the French and Belgian ambassadors to protest against their countries' involvement and to pressure them to stop. We want them to be worried, so when they are organizing their mercenaries, and to think that our troops are very near.

Angola has a certain moral duty, and a desire, to support the Katanga liberation movement. They also desire it because the Angolan leadership is angered by [Zairian leader] Mobutu [Sese Seko]'s behavior. Angola has asked us and the Soviets to give them weapons for delivery to the Katangans. We should wait for developments, however. Mobutu is an incompetent and weak politician. It's possible that he will not survive this crisis. The frontline states are now in favor of supporting Katanga, while Angola favors direct aid. We don't want to be involved in order not to give the USA an excuse to intervene. As I mentioned we will try to put pressure on Belgium and France.

It will be a great event if Mobutu falls.

In the People's Republic of the Congo there is a confusing situation following N'Gouabi's murder. The interior and defense ministers are competing for the leadership. There are also pro-Westerners in the military council. It is practically certain that the rightists murdered N'Gouabi. But the left wing was also dissatisfied with him as well. In other words there was a relatively uncertain situation there. We sent Comrade Almeyda to the funeral, and hope that the situation will stabilize. We were also asked to send a military unit to Brazzaville. The internal problems of the country must be solved by the Congolese themselves however. We have stationed a small military unit in Pointe Noire, and another one in Cabinda.

There were several requests for military aid from various sides: [Libyan leader Moammar] Qaddafi, Mengistu, and the Congolese leaders. During our stay in Africa we sent Carlos Rafael Rodriguez to Moscow to confer with our Soviet comrades and to Havana for consultations with our leadership. In order to find the best solution we must think through this question quietly and thoroughly and consider it in terms of the overall situation of the socialist camp. Above all we must do something for Mengistu...[section on Ethiopia printed in "Horn of Africa Crisis" section--ed.] ...With regard to military aid for the PR Congo and the Libyans we have not yet come to a decision.

I had consultations with [Houari] Boumedienne in Algeria and asked for his opinion. He assured me that Algeria would never abandon Libya. Algeria is very concerned

with the situation in the Mediterranean because of its security interests. It is in favor of supporting Libya, as long as military aid is confined to the socialist camp. That is not only a question between Cuba and Algeria. If we are to succeed in strengthening the revolution in Libya, Ethiopia, Mozambique, the PDRY [People's Democratic Republic of Yemen] and Angola we must have an integrated strategy for the whole African continent.

Angola is becoming closer to the socialist camp. It bought 1.5 billion rubles of weapons from the Soviets. Boumedienne thinks that [Egyptian President Anwar] Sadat is totally lost to us. In Syria there is also no leftist movement any more, especially after the Syrians defeated the progressive powers and the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] in Lebanon.

[Indian President] Indira Gandhi gambled away the elections.

In Africa we can inflict a severe defeat on the entire reactionary imperialist policy. We can free Africa from the influence of the USA and of the Chinese. The developments in Zaire are also very important. Libya and Algeria have large territories, Ethiopia has a great revolutionary potential. So there is a great counterweight to Sadat's betrayal in Egypt. It is even possible that Sadat will be turned around and that the imperialist influence in the Middle East can be turned back.

This must all be discussed with the Soviet Union. We follow its policies and its example.

We estimate that Libya's request is an expression of trust. One should not reject their request. Cuba cannot help it alone.

[subsequent sections omitted--ed.]