

# People's War – Stages And Tasks

-Sol Manthatha

The war of liberation inside our country is definitely on. Umkhonto We Sizwe is daily displaying an expanding presence and the enemy himself has admitted more than once that Umkhonto We Sizwe is there to stay in our land. But as pointed out in our Strategy and Tactics: "Guerilla warfare, the special and in our case the only form in which the armed liberation struggle can be launched, is neither static nor does it take place in a vacuum. The tempo, the overall strategy is to be employed, the opening of new fronts, the progression from lower to higher forms and thence to mobile warfare."

This suggests that guerilla warfare is not an end in itself, but a means towards an end. Guerilla warfare is a tactic employed chiefly at the initial stage of a people's war. The study of past people's wars teaches that a people's war develops through three main stages, each with its own distinctive features and tasks:

- a) The stage of guerilla warfare;
- b) the stage of equilibrium and
- c) the stage of general offensive.

Below follows a discussion of the three stages with particular reference to the South African situation.

## GUERRILLA WARFARE

Why guerilla warfare? "Guerilla warfare almost by definition presents a situation in which there is a vast imbalance of material and military resources between the opposing sides. It is designed to cope with the situation in which the enemy is infinitely superior in relation to every conventional factor of warfare. It is par excellence the weapon of the materially weak against the materially strong", states the Strategy and Tactics of the ANC.

During this stage the guerilla forces, small in number and armed with relatively inferior weapons have to contend with an

enemy who has at his command a relatively stable economy and enormous manpower resources to draw on. It is this disparity in strength which makes guerilla warfare an imperative for the materially weak. To commit the whole guerilla force to a few battles against an enemy who is well equipped with modern planes, warships, tanks, etc., should be suicidal. Consequently, a characteristic feature of this stage is the absence of an orthodox front of fighting lines. The front is where the enemy is and can be successfully engaged in combat.

The tactic employed chiefly during this stage is that of hit-and-run. The guerillas operate in very small units, hit the enemy where and when he expects least. "They attack the enemy from behind, outflank him or launch sudden attacks on his weak points. They pretend to attack the enemy's right flank while actually attacking his left, they concentrate for attack and disperse to dodge the enemy's reply" wrote Tru Ong-Chinn, a famous Vietnamese military leader, strategist and writer (*Selected Works*). Such hit and run operations spread all over the country disperse and stretch to the maximum the forces of the enemy, presenting them ever weaker and vulnerable in the face of the guerillas. In this way this mode of operation compensate the guerilla's initial weakness in strength since the enemy has to "attenuate his resources and lines of communication over the vast areas, ...to protect the widely scattered installations in which his economy is dependent." (*Strategy and Tactics of the ANC*).

The tasks of this stage are many and varied. Most of the battles especially the initial ones have often been referred to as armed propaganda. The successes scored by the guerillas in these initial battles are of much significance not only in as far as the physical damage they inflict on the enemy. By exposing the vulnerability of the enemy they demonstrate the ability of the revolutionary forces to successfully engage and defeat the enemy in combat and in this way instill confidence in the masses and reinforce their belief in the certainty of victory. On the other hand the losses the enemy suffers weary and discourage him, lowering his morale and that of his supporters. Armed propaganda in this instance should in no way be understood to be a means of mobilisation and consequently a substitute for political propaganda and agitational work. This article will not endeavour to discuss this very important aspect of a people's war. But it remains imperative to stress the indispensability of political mobilisation in a revolutionary war.

This stage is also charged with the task of heavily reducing the strength of the enemy, both personnel and material. of the latter objective is sabotage. Sabotage actions complement other armed actions in a very significant way. Through the destruction of roads, railways, communication and power lines, bridges and many other economic installations, economic setbacks with a telling effect are engendered and the finances of the enemy are gradually drained, making the maintenance of the armed forces arduous. On the other hand the guerillas, while gradually reducing the strength of the enemy, maintain and preserve their forces, expanding their army into a powerful force for the future higher forms of warfare.

If the burning question during the formative years of MK was how to launch guerilla warfare, now it is how to develop the armed struggle; how to raise the scope and scale as well as the quality of guerilla operations. Our war of liberation has definitely entered this first stage and is visibly growing. The recent past has seen our people's army, Umkhonto We Sizwe, spreading its assaults all over the country and itself steadily expanding. In the words of Comrade President O.R. Tambo: "...the enemy has proved unable to stop its growth, its expansion and the increasingly effective striking power of our guerilla army." However, the path immediately ahead is not a rosy one. To reduce the strength of the enemy considerably and transit to the next stages of the people's war fierce battles are still to be fought.

## EQUILIBRIUM

Militarily speaking guerilla warfare cannot topple a government. The enemy can sustain such small scale hit-and run operations for a very long if not indefinite period. Hence the need to switch over to the second stage of a people's war once the guerilla forces have grown in numbers and the strength of the enemy reduced to the extent that the initial disparity in strength has almost disappeared. As the word 'equilibrium' would suggest, the balance of forces during this stage has changed in favour of the guerillas; the forces of the two sides are now almost equal.

There's also a notable change in tactics during this stage. Though guerilla warfare remains the most widespread tactic,

especially during the initial phase, a new tactic known as mobile warfare is introduced. What is mobile warfare? It is a form of fighting in which the guerilla forces organised in bigger units and armed with relatively advanced weapons "group themselves rapidly and launch lightning attacks; encircling the enemy in order to destroy him, working round positions in order to attack him, attacking from behind rather than launching frontal attacks, advancing rapidly and withdrawing quickly". (Tru C'ng-Chihn - *Selected Writings*). At first mobile warfare plays a complementary role in relation to guerilla warfare and with the growth of the war their position change and mobile warfare becomes the principal tactic

This second stage is often referred to as a long, extremely hard and complicated one. It is also the key stage because it is during this stage that the outcome of the war is decided. This is the stage when the guerillas pass from an inferior position to a superior one; a stage when conditions are laid for the last stage, that of general counter-offensive. More often than not a question arises: shall we at some stage engage the powerful racist South African army in mobile warfare? While it may not be very possible to predict the course of a war, the arguments of those who answer the question in the negative are abstruse, absurd and far from convincing. They use the same arguments advanced earlier to disprove the very feasibility of armed struggle in South Africa, e.g., the strength of the South African Defence Force and Police, the high level of development of South Africa's transport and communication systems, the absence of bases to which we can flee across to sanctuary in the neighbouring countries, etc.

True enough, the South African army is powerful and the strength of the enemy should never be overlooked when working out tactics to be exercised at all times. But mobile warfare was applied by the Vietnamese against an enemy far more powerful and in command of modern transport and communication means, i.e. the United States of America. Cuba employed mobile warfare notwithstanding the absence of bases to flee across to sanctuary in the neighbouring countries. Even in our land it is just a matter of time before these defeatist conceptions are placed where they belong. We shall definitely employ mobile warfare when the time comes. The 'efficient' transport and communication systems shall have been rendered inefficient by our intensified actions of sabotage. We shall also have applied guerilla warfare to the greatest possible extent and as a result the enemy forces shall be scattered all over the

vast expanses of our land and with such a situation mobile warfare shall also become an imperative. Modern warfare also teaches that success in modern combat belongs to he who has the ability to muster large forces, deliver lightning but deadly blows and disperse and retreat at lightning speed before the enemy can group and counter-attack. As noted by the African Communist (*Fourth Quarter 1970*): "In such a huge country as South Africa, our men will be hard to find. By the time his planes arrive to bomb the guerilla fighters, they will have melted into the country-side. They will have merged into the people, to whom they belong and of whom they are part."

## GENERAL OFFENSIVE

During this stage the balance of forces has decisively changed in favour of the revolutionary forces. The guerillas, numerically and in arms, have gained an upper hand. The switch-over to this stage can be made even if the material forces of the revolutionary forces are still not superior to those of the enemy. Many factors, e.g., the weariness and discouragement of the enemy troops as a result of the long war and the defeats they always suffer, the exhaustion of the economy and finances of the enemy; severe condemnation of the regime by the world opinion and the growth of the campaign for the intensification of sanctions against the regime are but some of the many factors that may facilitate the transition to this last stage even if the revolutionary forces are still somehow inferior.

Mobile warfare plays a predominant role during this stage and is complemented and supported by guerilla warfare. Gradually mobile warfare grows into positional warfare which plays an outstanding role in the last phase.

What is positional warfare? "It is the deployment of forces of the regular army in readiness for a battle, digging trenches, setting up fortifications, checking the enemy's advance, taking advantage of the enemy's weak points and inadequacies to attack him and *occupy* his positions." (Tru O'ng Chihn - *Selected Writings, Emph.-Ed.*) In positional warfare the entire guerilla force, organised in large units, i.e. companies, battalions, brigades, etc., is thrown into battle to rout the enemy once and for all. Battles for cities and strong points is a characteristic feature of the war at this stage. "Our troops concentrate rapidly, act vigorously on the offensive and launch a series of well-planned lightning attacks on the cities and enemy positions to encircle and annihilate them."

(*ibid*). In the face of such a powerful guerilla offensive the enemy is forced to abandon and surrender many positions and withdraw to entrench himself in the big cities. The revolutionary forces occupy the abandoned, in fact, captured positions, build strong defences and establish people's rule. These liberated zones keep on expanding as the enemy retreats deeper and deeper until the whole country is liberated.

## LIBERATED ZONES

Shall we have liberated zones? The South African racist army is in a position to launch large-scale attacks against independent countries and occupy some territories for relatively long periods, what can stop it from overrunning those liberated areas? As pointed above, the balance of forces shall have shifted in our favour and besides that, the switch-over to positional warfare, let alone the establishment of liberated zones is possible when and only when we are as well-armed as the enemy. To apply positional warfare or establish liberated zones before this important condition is met would be to doom ourselves to defeat and destruction. If we are heavily armed to rebuff any attack in defence of an abandoned area and its people, why not occupy it and establish our rule?

In conclusion let us note that there are no strict and inviolable boundaries dividing the three stages. The latter stage grows out of the former and the former lays basis for the latter. The same can be said of the task of each stage. While the tasks of an earlier stage should never be postponed, some tasks and targets of a later stage can be carried out during an earlier stage, e.g., the attack of the SADF's H.Q. with 122mm rockets in August last year, something which no other guerilla force has ever managed to do at such an early stage of the war. Guerilla warfare, the tactic of the first stage is applied effectively through all the stages, giving the enemy no peace to eat, drink, no rest. The same can be said of sabotage, a weapon employed till the last minute of the war.

History teaches that not all people's wars develop along the three stages discussed above. The course of a particular war is not decided in the military battlefield only, but is influenced by numerous factors. For an example, the Zimbabwean war of liberation came to a close before reaching the third stage in full.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

people by our founding fathers - the ANC. . A custodian of our ancestors' heroic tradition of resistance on whose basis our people have continued to place stepping-stones to final liberation over the past 70 years, the ANC is our beacon to the future when the dream of Pixley ka Isaka Seme of a 'new and unique civilisation' shall have become a reality.

---

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14

Our war of liberation will also, as it has started, introduce new chapters in the history of guerilla warfare. But whatever the case may be, the revolutionary forces must be in command of a strong army by the time the conditions are ripe for the seizure of power, an army in a position not only to seize power but also to defend it.

In many cases than one the closure of the third stage with victory over the colonial enemy has not meant an end to the war. The Vietnamese people, after a long war against the French had to live through yet a more bloody war against the United States of America. The history of Angola is well known to us all. After the defeat of the Portuguese colonialists, the Angolan people were locked in yet another bitter war against the South African interventionists, a war that persists to this day. Such are the lessons of history and they should not be forgotten, especially by us who are still fighting. This means that we should not only be geared towards a protracted and bloody war but also be ready to face any intervention for the forces of reaction will not hesitate to come to the aid of their racist allies by all means, including military intervention as our war grows from strength to strength.

### **DAWN politiXword No.3 Answers**

ACROSS: 1. Morogoro 7. E r r s 8. Posters  
10. Hoe 11. Orbs 13. Mission 15. KO  
16. Dew 17. Women 20. Aggett.

DOWN: 2. Rush 3. Glee 4. Resound 5. Or  
6. Asks 8. Poem 9. Toes 12. Bokwe  
14. Seme 18. Nag 19. Be