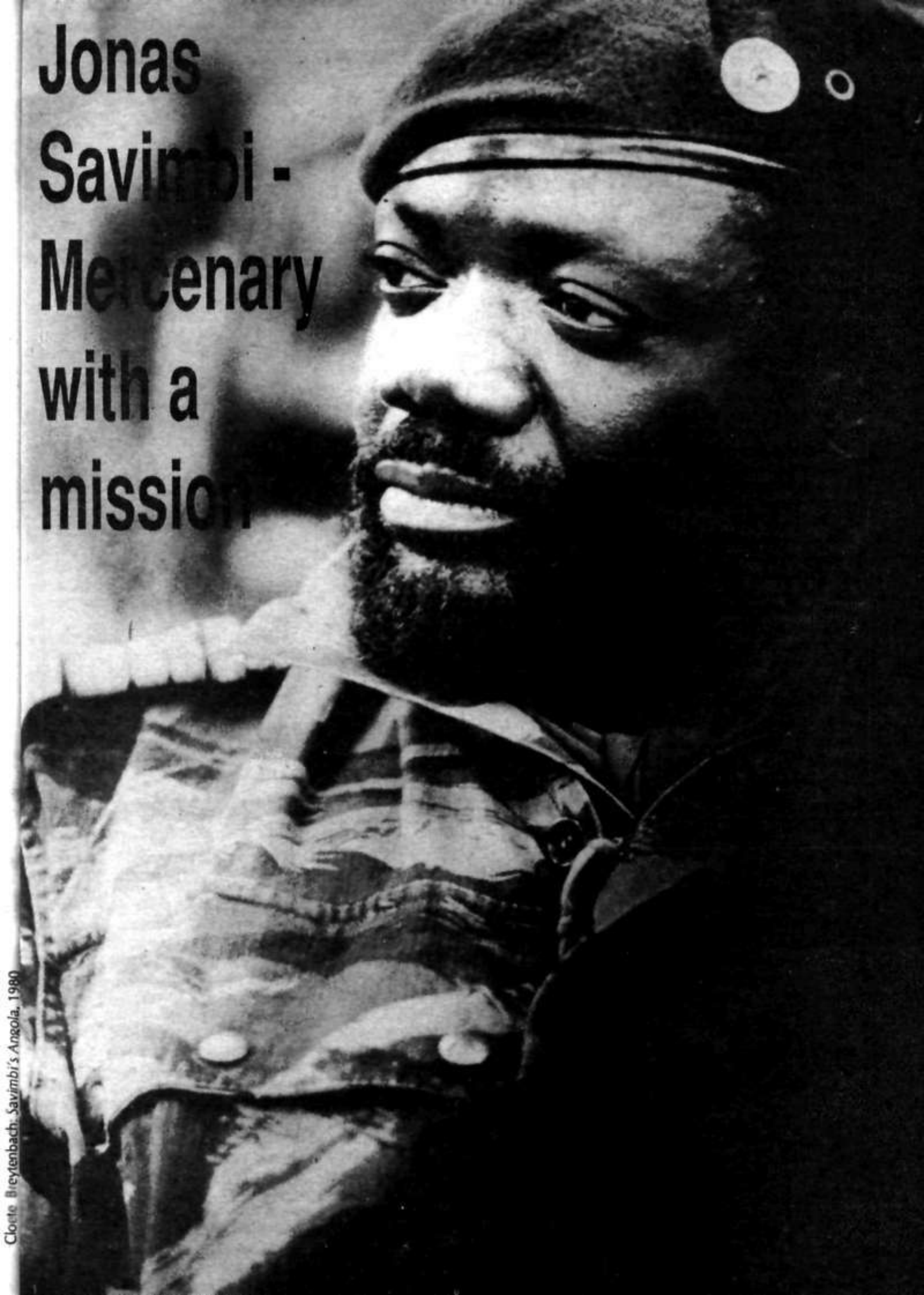


**Jonas
Savimbi -
Mercenary
with a
mission**



'It was immediately clear that Unita was an organisation of a very different calibre from the FNLA', he wrote.

On learning that Unita had 4 000 troops, Stockwell wrote: 'Here was the most significant finding of my trip. We had understood Unita was the weakest of the three liberation movements; in fact Savimbi's army was several times larger than the FNLA's, better led and supported by a political organisation of some depth. This would be good news, an unexpected asset in our war against the MPLA'. He found Savimbi 'a good man'.

Only years later would Stockwell - sickened by the havoc he had wrought in Angola - reassess his view: 'Savimbi has no ideology ... He believes in nothing beyond his own selfish ambitions and fighting has become his way of life'.

Stockwell had barely digested the good news of Unita's fighting strength when the South Africans entered Savimbi's life for the first time.

Throughout the entire six months of what became known as Angola's second war of liberation, Savimbi claimed Unita alone was responsible for the conquest of southern and central Angola - telling Reuters news agency that 'there are no South African troops committed by the South African government here'.

News of a South African invasion, however, destroyed the support Savimbi had skilfully developed in Africa by portraying his movement as Africanist, nationalist and anti-Marxist.

When the second war of liberation ended with the withdrawal of South African forces in early 1976, Savimbi took his remaining forces and fled south-east into Cuando Cubango province, abandoning the cities captured for Unita by the South African advance.

He went back to the bush to resume what Unita had been doing since 1971: waging a guerilla campaign against the MPLA.

Initially he did so without the massive South African aid that later characterised his struggle. Pretoria's generals spent the early months of 1976 trying to construct a surrogate force around Daniel Chipenda, a guerilla commander who had split

from both the MPLA and the FNLA and who had fled south on independence.

Pretoria eventually judged him too unreliable an ally and dissolved the force into the newly-created SADF 32 (Buffalo) Battalion.

By 1977 Savimbi was back in favour, with the SADF appointing its first full-time liaison officer with Unita.

Savimbi was allowed to travel through Namibia and South Africa on a mission to reconstruct a support-base among Africa's more right-wing heads of state. The first to give their blessings were Senegal's Leopold Senghor and Morocco's King Hassan.

Pretoria's enthusiasm for Unita waned slightly in 1978 during talks on Namibian independence, but resumed once South Africa had successfully dodged international pressure on the issue.

By 1979, Savimbi's biographer Bridgland acknowledges, South Africa's support for Unita was 'substantial ... notwithstanding Savimbi's denials'.

The US too - under 'liberal' president Jimmy Carter - was lending a hand. Banned by the US senate from aiding Unita directly, Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski asked the People's Republic of China to stand in for the US in Angola, according to documents leaked to Washington journalists in 1978. The Chinese obliged, delivering - via Namibia - 600 tonnes of weapons in early 1979.

Some of this was presumably used in a campaign of urban terrorism unleashed by Unita in the same year - in a matter of weeks Unita bombs killed 17 people on a commuter train, ten in a fairground and 150 in a marketplace. The campaign continued well into 1980 and beyond. Elsewhere, Savimbi directed his energy at destroying the country's economic infrastructure - bombing bridges, wrecking roads and ravaging towns.

His campaign forced the Luanda government - desperately needing peace to rebuild their shattered country - to concentrate their energies on defence: from 1978 to 1980 the government armed forces, Fapla, tripled in size to 80 000.

Savimbi also began challenging for control of towns in the south and

south-east - taking Mavinga in late 1979, and establishing his headquarters at Jamba.

While Savimbi continued to claim exclusive Unita responsibility for these actions, his credibility was strained by the 1980 desertion of two members of 32 Battalion. British mercenary Trevor Edwards told newspapers how 300 32 Battalion soldiers had driven 75 km into Angola to seize the town of Savate - one of the first towns Savimbi claimed to have wrested from government control.

Former FNLA guerrilla Jose Belmondo, an Angolan who fled 32 Battalion soon afterwards, confirmed this: 'Whenever Unita had operational difficulties Savimbi would contact South African military security ... 32 Battalion would go in and operate on behalf of Unita'.

The capture of South African special forces saboteur Wynand du Toit during an attempt to blow up oil production facilities in Cabinda in the north only served to confirm these claims.

Savimbi, however, was riding on the crest of a publicity wave, claiming by 1980 to have 12 000 troops under his command. A year later, this figure had grown to 20 000.

At this time former CIA agent Stockwell estimated that Savimbi had only 300 guerillas operating in Angola.

While Stockwell may have been under-estimating Unita's strength, it should be recalled that Savimbi was, by 1980, claiming Cuba had 40 000 troops in Angola - while US intelligence officials put the figure at less than half that.

Whatever 'his' successes, Savimbi was increasingly dependent on South Africa - and thus increasingly vulnerable to Pretoria's pressure.

His views on apartheid softened markedly as his reliance increased. 'It is not for us to say what is right or what is wrong with our neighbouring countries', he responded to a journalist's query on South Africa's internal policies. And when PW Botha was inaugurated as South Africa's first executive president, Savimbi was there to speak glowingly of Botha as 'my friend'. He criticised opponents of apartheid for refusing to endorse Botha's 'reforms', saying 'they must have something to hide'.

Elsewhere too, Savimbi was finding new and unexpected friends. Having quit UPA in 1965 because 'Roberto has sold himself to the American imperialists', Savimbi welcomed the election of Ronald Reagan. Within months US military advisers had visited Jamba and the new administration began pouring almost R100-million a year into Unita.

By 1985 Savimbi's investment in Pretoria's friendship began to pay dues: a major MPLA offensive against Mavinga was beaten off only by massive South African intervention. In an unusually honest mood, Savimbi afterwards boasted to a *Washington Post* reporter how he had called in the South African military to head off the attack: 'We said: "give us mortars, ammo and cannons of every quality" - and they gave it'.

The South African connection did not leave Unita unchanged. South African destruction of the southern provinces before it withdrew from Angola caused major tensions among Ovambo-speaking Unita members, whose homes lay in ruins as a result.

Savimbi cracked down hard on the dissidents. Several senior Ovambo-speaking commanders disappeared, while Antonio Vakulakuta, a traditional leader among southern Angola's Ovambo-speakers who had helped cement Unita's initially close relationship with Swapo, fled to Namibia with 3 000 followers. He was arrested and handed back to Savimbi. He has not been heard of since.

Elsewhere in Unita dissent was also growing. As Fapla's strength grew throughout the 1980s and the prospect of a Unita military victory diminished, the organisation switched its tactics in an attempt to force the Luanda government to talk. 'More and more attacks are directed at women and children to terrorise the population and create instability', a United Nations agency recorded at the time. But these targets were the home bases of many of Unita's leaders who, not unexpectedly, opposed the switch in tactics.

The Cuito Cuanavale campaign also fed the growing dissidence, switching Unita's main form of warfare from guerilla campaigns to conventional fighting, in which

Unita troops formed the front-line of the South African advance.

Savimbi admits that more than 1 000 Unita troops died in the unsuccessful attempt to take Cuito - although Western sources put the figure at twice that.

Understandably the decision to switch tactics was widely unpopular, although Savimbi, increasingly functioning as part of South Africa's military initiative in Angola, almost certainly had little choice.

By 1988, dissidence was moving increasingly into the open. Dissidents, particularly those far enough from Savimbi to avoid instant disappearance, forming a loose 'ditch Savimbi' alliance known as Unita-D (Unita-Democrats). Several of its members are known to have been in contact with officials of the MPLA-PT government. 'The young guard is tired of war. It is an open secret that Unita intellectuals abroad sometimes meet (MPLA officials). They compare views and wonder what point is served by the civil war which has now lasted 13 years', reports *Africa Confidential* newsletter.

And since Cuito, Unita has continually lost supporters - in one July incident 8 000 Unita supporters gave themselves up to the Angolan authorities.

The Dos Santos government's current policy towards Unita appears to be designed to hasten this disintegration. While welcoming former Unita supporters back into 'the Angolan family', the MPLA-PT is holding out the possibility of talks with Unita while encouraging a break-down of support for Savimbi himself.

Fapla's post-Cuito Cuanavale military campaign against Unita appears to be motivated by the same logic - steadily destroying Unita strongholds in south and central Angola while delaying an attack on Jamba itself. Fapla thinking appears to be that a direct attack now on Jamba could draw the South Africans back in, thus giving Unita a new lease on life, and persuading dissidents to shelve their opposition to Savimbi in the interests of the movement. Instead, Luanda appears to be attempting to bleed Unita to death.

The Unita president has responded in recent months by drawing his

senior leadership from an increasingly small pool - many are now either related to him or drawn from the Andulo-Ovimbundu tribal group from which Savimbi himself comes. This is particularly true of the commanders of Unita security and intelligence units, according to *Africa Confidential*.

At the same time Savimbi has tried to re-define loyalty towards Unita as loyalty towards himself. Massive pictures of the rebel leader adorn Jamba, while the Unita manual, 'The practical guide for the cadre' demands personal loyalty to Savimbi.

This manual also throws interesting light on Savimbi's attempts to portray himself as a 'freedom fighter' struggling against the one-party democracy of the MPLA-PT. 'Unita has as its final objective to take power and institute a state', the guide says. 'Within the state there has to be permanent police supervision - not the police institution of law and order, but a political police'.

And while Savimbi has long maintained that he seeks a coalition government with the MPLA-PT, the manual says: 'Reconciliation is part of our tactics, but it is not part of our strategy because that is not possible ... Unita can never co-exist with the MPLA. It is not possible to co-exist in a state, not today or tomorrow'.

While Savimbi is not about to collapse tomorrow - increased US support via Zaire will compensate to a limited extent for the lack of South African backing - his military activities will be substantially curtailed in future.

At the same time, his political position within Angola is increasingly tenuous. While in the early years of independence he was able to trade on his reputation as an anti-colonial leader ('Operation Timber' notwithstanding), this is steadily finding less resonance in Angolan society. For more than half of Angola's nine million people are below the age of 15 with no personal recollection of life under the Portuguese. Their entire experience is of life in post-colonial Angola and they know Savimbi not as a contributor to Angolan independence but as 'the gate through which foreign invaders have entered and ruined our country'.