

100426 ANGOLA - The death of one man does not end a war

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Photo: [Guy Oliver/IRIN](#)

Antonio Bento Bembe, Angola's minister for human rights and a former leader of a Cabindan separatist movement

The final chapter in the long-running separatist war in Angola's Cabinda Province will not be decided by a military showdown in dense jungle terrain, but by the imminent death of a "sick old man" on a distant continent.

"N'Zita is from the same school as [UNITA leader Jonas] Savimbi. He dreams of a glorious military victory, but he is a sick old man on his death bed in Paris, and when he dies so will his cause," Antonio Bento Bembe, recently appointed Angola's first minister of human rights in the ruling MPLA government, told IRIN at his offices in the capital, Luanda.

Bento Bembe is a former combatant of the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC) and the secretary-general of the splinter group FLEC Renovada.

He dismissed any suggestion that the separatist movement to which he dedicated 30 years of his life still existed, apart from "in the mind" of Henrique N'Zita Tiago, now exiled in the French capital, Paris, and the leader of FLEC-FAC (Armed Forces of Cabinda).

In 2006 Bento Bembe - then president of the Cabindan Forum for Dialogue (FCD), which included representatives of all FLEC factions, as well as civil society and church groups - signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which, at least on paper, brought an end to Cabinda's separatist conflict and ambitions.

Bento Bembe said peace had come to Cabinda since the signing of the memorandum and any sporadic acts of violence, such as the January 2010 ambush of a bus carrying Togo's football team during the African Nations soccer tournament, were the work "of bandits and terrorists".

Togo's assistant coach, the soccer team's spokesman and an Angolan bus driver were killed in the attack and eight members of the entourage wounded.

The Togo ambush has not been the only such event: a deminer working in Cabinda, who declined to be identified, told IRIN that operations near Miconje, near the Congo-Brazzaville border, were abandoned on 1 November 2009 because of security concerns.

A 12-man demining team resumed work on 1 February 2010, protected by 10 Angolan troops with helicopter support, and who were constantly in radio contact with a nearby army garrison.

Raul Danda, a Cabinda-born UNITA parliamentarian and former member of the now disbanded Mpalabanda Cabinda Civic Movement, told IRIN: "The Angolans don't want to admit to a war. To say that the death of N'Zita will end Cabinda's struggle is completely wrong - he is just one person. He is not the only one ... Don't think for a second this struggle is going to stop [with N'Zita's death]."

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FLEC-FAC's vice president, Alexandre Tati, is believed to be active in and around the separatist movement's areas of operations.

N'Zita was part of the 1961 formation of the Movement for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (MLEC), which evolved into FLEC two years later. In 1975, when Angola achieved independence from Portugal, FLEC split into as many as five factions.

During a meeting in the Netherlands in 2004, in an attempt to solve Cabinda's troubles, FLEC's two main splinter groups, FLEC-FAC and FLEC Renovado - founded by Tiburcio Zinga - reformed under the banner of FLEC.

Bento Bembe was appointed president of the FCD, but it was alleged that he signed the MOU without the authority of the coalition members, that Cabindans were granted no political concessions, and that the memorandum merely provided an amnesty for combatants and a range of government posts to officials in the movement. N'Zita returned his group to the bush war in the wake of the signing.

Danda said Bento Bembe "was sold to the Angolan government", as the ruling MPLA and President Eduardo Dos Santos were not interested in a political solution because they believe they "can just buy people."

Angola has become Africa's largest oil producer partly because it controls Cabinda, whose geographical position allows it to lay claim to massive off-shore oil reserves. However, the colonial histories of Angola and Cabinda are not mirror images, and this is where the bid for independence by FLEC finds the oxygen to sustain itself.

Claims of independence

The Treaty of Simulambuco, signed in 1885 between the N'Goyo Kingdom and Portugal, granted Cabinda the status of a protectorate and coincided with the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, which divided Africa between the European colonial powers in what became known as "The Scramble for Africa".

Angola had been a Portuguese colony for a few hundred years, but Cabinda had not, and the rationale for it becoming a protectorate was to prevent the expansion of the Belgian Congo under King Leopold II; Cabinda was subsequently administered separately by Portugal.

In the 1930s Portuguese dictator António de Oliveira Salazar declared Angola a province of Portugal and Cabinda was brought under the same administration. Those favouring independence for Cabinda claim Angola's first government annexed it at independence in 1975.

The MPLA government views Cabinda as a province of Angola and has dismissed cultural differences as an argument for self-determination, as "not enough to grant it [Cabinda] independence, because all the provinces in the country have specific cultures".

Recognition of FLEC's struggle for an independent Cabindan state was eclipsed by nearly three decades of civil war between the MPLA and UNITA in Angola, when the country became a Cold War playground for the competing strategic interests of the United States and the former Soviet Union. The MPLA also blamed FLEC military activity in Cabinda on UNITA, further damaging the organisation's international profile.

So it was no small irony that when the Togo soccer players were ambushed, the international media used the event as a stick to beat South Africa for possible poor security when hosting the soccer world cup in June 2010, rather than to highlight FLEC's struggle for independence.

The case for autonomy

Alcides Sakala, UNITA's spokesman and secretary for foreign affairs, told IRIN the opposition party favoured autonomy for Cabinda - similar to the status that the Azores and Madeira enjoy under Portugal - as an independent state would prove vulnerable to the avarice of neighbouring countries that might be tempted by the territory's oil wealth.

Danda, who said he had joined UNITA to promote Cabinda's cause, noted that FLEC might accept an autonomous state with a large degree of self-government, but currently it was "being occupied by Angolan troops; Angola is not protecting Cabindans, it is killing Cabindans."

Muluka-Anne Miti, a researcher for the rights group, Amnesty International, and a specialist in Lusophone Africa, told IRIN that reports of fighting were sporadic, and although Cabinda could not be classified as a police state, there was "a lot of [state] oppression".

She said the separatist agenda was not just being led by FLEC, which "still enjoyed huge support on the ground ... It's just that people feel differently in Cabinda, and it will take a long time to change that."