Peace Talks in Ethiopia

It was late on Saturday 23 January when I reached the Welsh border, and I left again at midday on Sunday to catch the last plane to Vienna. There was no point in my returning to Luanda, since I could more easily reach Addis Ababa from Frankfurt, allowing me to take part in the Vienna meeting for the first of the three days and say my piece about Angola.

There was a very pleasant surprise: the Austrian Government bestowed on me its highest award for foreign diplomats – Das Grosse Goldene Ehrenzeichen am Bande – in recognition of my five years’ service as Director-General of the United Nations office at Vienna. I had for so many months been subjected to verbal and other aggression that this civilised occasion, marked by appreciative words, champagne and the presence of friends and former colleagues, seemed something out of a dream world.

Early on Tuesday 26 January I set off for Addis Ababa in the company of Mr Layashi Yaker, the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa and doyen of Africa Hall, who had been attending the same meeting as myself. I had been Resident Representative of the UN Development Programme in Ethiopia in the mid-1960s, and for a time had had my office in Africa Hall, where the peace talks were now being held. On my previous return visits, huge portraits of Marx, Lenin and Engels had dominated great tracts of the city, and my oldest Ethiopian friend, Princess Aida Desta, whom I had known at Cambridge, had been languishing for long years in prison with her mother and sisters. Now the portraits had been swept away, Aida was free and Ethiopia too was in transition. Much had changed since my first stay there nearly 30 years before. But it still smelled the same as we drove that night from the airport – the pungent mixture of eucalyptus smoke and dark, rich earth that was unmistakeably Addis Ababa, and unmistakeably Africa.

My UNAVEM colleagues arrived the next morning, wearied by the long night flight from Luanda, a milk-run calling at various places across Africa en route. It would have been less tiring to have come with the Government delegation on their special jet, but we had opted for independent means to avoid any accusations that UNAVEM owed favours to the Government. By Wednesday morning everyone had arrived but the bulk of the UNITA delegation. Besides myself, the UNAVEM team consisted of Mike Nyambuya and Bill Egar on the military side, Ebrima Jobarteh, and two interpreters, Afonso Almeida and Christian Prat-Vincent.

The Government had brought a large delegation of 15 people, headed, rather surprisingly, by Dr Fernando Faustino Muteka – who had not played any preeminent role in the CCPM and was chiefly noted for having been Secretary of State for Coffee: he had been at Namibe, but simply as one of the delegation, in his capacity as political adviser in the presidency. He was thus rather an unknown
quantity. The choice was significant in that he was an Ovimbundu, the first person of that ethnic origin to have been appointed to the MPLA Government’s Council of Ministers in January 1978. The Government’s political team included three Ministers or Vice-Ministers: General Higino Carneiro headed the military part of the delegation, which included three other generals. The Angolan Ambassador to Ethiopia, Dr Almeida, was also attached to the delegation, as were representatives of three parties—the FNLA, the PLD and the PRS. Two members of UNITA’s delegation – Brigadier Samakuva, the UNITA representative in London, and Marcos Samondo from New York – had arrived directly. But the time and mode of arrival of the main UNITA delegation, headed by General Eugenio Manuvakola, now Secretary-General, was a well-kept secret.

I had planned to leave Wednesday morning free so I could have a meeting with the two delegation heads to agree on procedure, which assumes an almost disproportionate importance in delicate negotiations of this kind. The morning wore on and there was still no news of UNITA’s arrival. Everyone stood around talking desultorily and tension rose by the minute. My spirits were again at rock bottom. My whole life seemed to be spent waiting in vain for UNITA.

Colonel Ross and Hugo Anson plied us with daily updates from Luanda. Their messages were not encouraging. Fighting was continuing everywhere and there was a growing perception that UNITA was gaining the upper hand, and might shortly attack Cabinda, Malange and even Luanda, as well as Saurimo and Luena. A few days earlier it had taken Soyo, the north-western oil port, without evidence of serious resistance. It had destroyed much of Luanda’s water supply at Quifangongo during the weekend: depriving the capital of electricity and water was as likely a way of bringing Luanda to its knees as direct assault, and far less risky. An outright push to take Luanda could not be discounted.

The general view was that UNITA still had a larger number of better led, trained, equipped and motivated troops than the Government, and some observers were beginning to warn against assuming too easily that the war would be inconclusive. Early on 26 January there were reports of fighting in Menongue and of UNITA concentrating troops at Catengue for an assault on Benguela. Cabinda was also expecting an attack, but a strong warning by the United States that its oil interests in the enclave should not be harmed appeared to be having an effect. A fierce battle was still going on in Huambo. The information available to UNAVEM was, however, sporadic and in many cases unverifiable, since we had had to reduce our presence in Angola from 67 to just six locations along the Atlantic coastline: Luanda, Cabinda, Sumbe, Benguela, Lubango and Namibe. We had lost our ‘eyes and ears’ in the interior, and with them our capacity for on-the-spot verification and mediation.

The Government, suffering on the battlefield, was maintaining a strong propaganda offensive through the media. Every day brought fresh allegations that Zairean troops, white mercenaries and South African aircraft were assisting UNITA. On 24 January President dos Santos had addressed an unusually short, sharp note to the Secretary-General, beginning with the words ‘It is with pro-