Caught in the middle:
Free circulation amidst conflict

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Prologue

Laura remembered well the day her flight in the United Nations C-130 plane had landed on Negage air strip (Exhibit 1). It was early January, 1996 and the cargo plane had been almost empty, carrying only a generator for the town’s hospital, a standard Health Kit to start supplying the health post in the quartering area, and a much needed crate of food provisions. She had felt like Jonas in the whale’s belly. Only two passengers were aboard: herself and Giulia, a younger colleague. The rest of the Italian NGO team was due to arrive over the next few days.

The drive from the airport to Negage Quartering Area (QA), the camp where she and Giulia would be quartered, was her first opportunity to look at the landscape. During Portuguese colonial rule the province had been a centre for coffee production. You could still see where coffee plantations had grown on top of the now grass-covered hills, while in the small valleys in-between the jungle had been left intact. It was a landscape that invited long walks, unfortunately forbidden due to the widespread presence of land mines.

The road was not bad by Angolan standards; it still had some semblance of a tarmac surface and within 15 minutes, Laura and Giulia had arrived at the QA.

Now, months later Laura looked back at those first days with amazement. She had been so naïve then about the political situation in Angola, and about the possibility that an NGO team like herself and Giulia could be caught up in a frightening situation. What had she learned from the experience? Had her decisions been the best ones? Could she have been better prepared to deal with what had happened to her? And if so, how?

Background

Laura was part of a team sent to Angola by an Italian NGO, The Centre for International Cooperation (CIC). Within a framework agreement with the UN Humanitarian Coordination Unit (UCAH), the CIC had agreed to deploy five international experts to manage humanitarian programmes for UNITA guerrilla soldiers, soon to be quartered within a camp 10 kilometres from the town of Negage. The CIC team was composed of Laura who was to be the camp nurse; doctor, logistician, a Literacy expert, and Giulia who would be responsible for Civic Education.
A Quartering Area is basically a military camp divided into two main sections: One area where troops are disarmed and quartered and one administrative area where international personnel live and where main facilities are located. In a post war scenario, QAs are usually established to assemble and count military personnel and disarm militias (Exhibit 2).

The Angolan conflict and peace process

In 1996, Angola had been engulfed by civil war for over 20 years. The war began in 1975 immediately following the country’s independence from the colonial power, Portugal, and was fought by two liberation movements: The Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) and the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA). By 1996, Angolan territory was divided in two: A quasi-state controlled by UNITA and a formal state controlled by MPLA.

The end of the Cold War appeared to open the possibility of ending the war. The international community enthusiastically welcomed the success of the UN monitored repatriation of some 50,000 Cuban troops deployed in support of MPLA. Soon after, at the request of the two Angolan factions, the UN deployed a peacekeeping operation with the task of facilitating a war-to-peace transition that would have to lead to the running of multi-party elections, scheduled for autumn 1992.

The process was marred from the beginning and the September 1992 elections took place against a background of a failed disarmament process. The MPLA won the election but within days, UNITA rejected the result and war re-erupted with unprecedented levels of violence. By January 1993, UNITA controlled 60% of the country including the important towns of Uige (North) and Huambo (Central). The cities of Angola were ravaged by the war, resulting in the widespread destruction of the already poor infrastructure.

The war raged on for almost two more years and international pressure to bring the carnage to a halt had initially little impact. In December 1993, the UN Security Council, in an unprecedented step imposed arms and petroleum sanctions on UNITA.

The continued pressure finally resulted in the start of peace talks in Lusaka, Zambia, in November 1993. Peace negotiations were frustratingly slow, affected by military operations on the ground. The Government was on the offensive, recapturing the important towns lost in the post-elections fighting. In particular, the city of Huambo was taken few days before the signature of the peace protocol. In protest UNITA’s leader, Savimbi, refused to go to Lusaka to sign the agreement. In response the Angolan President of Angola sent to the ceremony his Minister of External Relations.

1Between 1993 and 1994 it is estimated that 300,000 (3% of the whole population) Angolans died as a consequence of the war.
The Lusaka Peace Protocol (20th November, 1994) detailed the war-to-peace transition’s main phases: Ceasefire, disarming and quartering of UNITA military forces, integrating part of UNITA military forces into the Angolan formal army, a coalition government, reintegration into civilian life of the redundant number of soldiers, and the running of elections. The Protocol also foresaw the deployment of a peacekeeping force (UNAVEM III) to oversee the implementation of the peace process (Exhibit 3).

It was with deep mutual distrust, continued import of arms and violent confrontations throughout the country that this attempt to end the war in Angola began in 1995. The commitment of the two sides could be described as anything but enthusiastic.

Negage Quartering Area, January 1996
The QA was huge, set to the left of the main road and covering an area the size of several football fields. Cleared and de-mined, the camp had been built by an Indian battalion of blue helmets (UN soldiers) who had set up their quarters on the other side of the road on a higher piece of land overlooking the whole QA.

A small, unpaved road connected the main road to the QA. From the parking lot Laura and Giulia could see rows of empty tents covering the top of a small hill. These would lodge the UNITA military forces once the quartering process finally started. A few meters from where Laura was standing she could see the entrance of the Administrative Area, dominated by a watch tower patrolled by an Indian soldier who was waving at her in welcome. The whole Administrative Area was surrounded by a barbed wire fence. Military green was the dominant colour, in contrast to the reddish tone of the land.

Laura turned as she heard her name called. It was Gilberto, who was the camp administrator, and Marcin, the UN demobilisation and reintegration officer. They welcomed the two women to the camp and then introduced them to the four UN volunteers who completed the staff working in the QA. The introductory tour of the Administrative area was brief: They were shown the communication tent, an office tent, a bigger tent with a kitchen and a communal meeting area. There were also warehouses stinking of dried fish where food and non-food items were stockpiled. Lastly, they entered the small tents that served as ‘bedrooms for the staff’.

Negage QA - Overview
“A real five-star hotel,” commented Giulia. Two big generators provided electricity around the clock so that, as Laura later realised, QA actually enjoyed a more reliable source of electricity than the capital, Luanda.

At the end of the tour, Gilberto handed two Motorola walkie-talkies over to Laura and Giulia. “Keep these always charged and bring them along every time you leave the Admin area;” he ordered. “Set them to channel four and don’t forget to pick your own call sign,” adding, “Never use your real names on radio.”

Four months later, Laura looked back on a busy but satisfying period. The first weeks had been spent preparing for the arrival of the UNITA soldiers. They had worked hard to ensure that the health post in the camp was operational and the city hospital ready for the expected influx of patients. The priority was to set up a water system able to provide safe water and avoid much feared outbreaks of water borne diseases.

**February 1996**

At the end of January, the Peace Process began to accelerate. UNITA was put under pressure to comply with its commitments by an upcoming UN Security Council Resolution. Soldiers finally started to arrive in Negage. Trucks went back and forth unloading hundreds of soldiers a day, so that within ten days all the expected 5000 combatants had been disarmed and quartered in the camp.

During this time, the civil and military QA staff worked over 14 hours a day. Days began at sunrise and went on until the last soldier had been identified, disarmed and registered and basic items such as soap, blankets, cutlery, and towels had been distributed. Often the registration procedures went on way into the evening. During the days following the initial inflow, full medical screening of soldiers began, and the doctor and Laura found long queues of men in line at their health post waiting to have their first medical check-up in years, if ever.

By early April a routine had replaced the initial emergency phase, and staff benefited from a more manageable workload. The soldiers' families had also started to arrive and they were lodged in a nearby camp outside the QA. They arrived at a slower rate,
but soon formed a community of 24,000 individuals. There were emergencies, of course, and staff could be woken up in the middle of the night to get up and deal with a soldier reacting badly to sleeping sickness medication, or help a woman entering labour.

Chapter 1: An Eventful Journey

On April 22nd, Laura learned she was to go to Uige the next day to attend a humanitarian coordination meeting. The peace process was proceeding very slowly, and UNITA was conducting a press campaign claiming that living conditions in the QAs were inadequate. Everybody was keen to avoid any major health problems that could easily be transformed into a political issue, so the meeting in Uige had been called to discuss what should be done. Tiago, the trusted NGO driver, would take her there and Laura found him busy checking that the car was in order. “What time are we leaving tomorrow Tiago?” she asked. “I need to be at the meeting by 10am.” “We should leave by 8 o’clock at the latest Donna Laura,” replied Tiago. Before going to sleep that night, Laura recharged her Motorola walkie-talkie and asked Carlos, the radio operator, to make sure that her radio had the Uige frequencies on one channel.

April 23rd

Laura liked Tiago. He was a reliable, careful driver who always made sure that the car was in good condition. Today’s drive to Uige was easy but often they had to go to remote areas on bad roads when a breakdown could mean real trouble. Laura often drove herself but having Tiago drive was a luxury that allowed her to take a much needed nap on the way.

“Donna Laura!” Tiago’s voice woke Laura from her dozing. “Look over there!” Sitting up she saw three pick-ups parked in the bush behind an empty guard post. You could spot men in uniform moving around behind the bushes. “Where are we?” she responded. “Senga, it’s the front line,” Tiago replied. It was the first time Laura had noticed military movement there. Officially all Government troops had retreated to barracks and the UNITA military forces were assembled in the QA, at least in this area. “Something to report,” thought Laura.

The trip continued uneventfully and eventually they approached Uige. At Candombe Novo, the suburbs leading into Uige, they met the standard police checkpoint. Usually, the police merely
gave a distracted look inside the car and let vehicles marked with a humanitarian organisation logo pass without too much hassle.

This time, however, one of the police began to fire questions at them quite aggressively. Where had they come from, and what were they doing in Uige? Surprised, Laura began to explain that they were Quartering Area staff heading for a meeting at UNAVEM regional headquarters.

Discussion at the checkpoint

“Let me see your documents,” the policemen asked Tiago who immediately complied by showing his ID and NGO card. These stated that he was a humanitarian worker and requested that all civilian and military Angolan authorities assist this person in his/her work. After looking at the documents, the policeman told Tiago to get out of the car. That made Laura address the policeman. “Listen, we come to Uige at least once a week and we have never had any problems before. So please, give my driver his documents back and let us go!”

The policeman looked at Laura and took the documents over to a superior who was standing nearby. Laura got out of the car to approach the man. “Officer, what’s the problem?” The superior officer answered without looking up from the documents. “Your driver is from a village inside UNITA controlled territory,” he said. “We have to carry out a check on him.”


“I’m afraid we’ll have to take him to the police station for questioning,” continued the officer.

“Are you kidding me?” By now Laura was getting really upset. The discussion went on for several minutes, with Laura pointing out the rules on free circulation laid down in the Lusaka Protocol and adding all the relevant regulations in national and international law she could think of. But the superior police officer remained firm in his decision to take Tiago to the police station for questioning. “Okay,” said Laura finally, by then exasperated, “I want to talk to your superior, and by the way, what is your name and rank?” “Sergeant Molina,” was the reply.

At the police station

Laura followed the police car containing a terrified Tiago and the Sergeant. While driving, she radioed Sheila, the Uige-based humanitarian coordinator who was to chair the meeting. Briefly she explained what happened. “I need help,” Laura concluded.

It took only a few minutes to reach the police station, a ruined building that from the outside still showed signs of battle. Inside, dreariness dominated. A table, three broken chairs, a filing cabinet leaning drunkenly. Sergeant Molina led Tiago towards a door at the back of the room. “Where are you taking him?” cried Laura. “We’ll keep him in a cell until his position is clarified,” the Sergeant replied. Tiago looked desperately at Laura, his eyes wide with disbelief and fear.
“We’ll get you out Tiago, don’t worry,” said Laura. She was trying to be reassuring but her words sounded meaningless and hollow. Anxiety was mounting inside her making breathing difficult.

When the Sergeant re-entered Laura spoke to him with a calm she was not feeling. “Where is your superior?” “Out on duty. He’ll be back sooner or later.” Translated this meant it would be a long wait. Laura sat on one of the flimsy chairs, first testing its resistance before fully putting her weight on it. She was going over the events of the last two hours, trying to think of a strategy that might get Tiago out.

“How long have you been in the police?” Laura asked in an attempt to start up a conversation. “Seven years.” “And, do you like it?” “It’s a job.” Laura tried to small talk: “Which part of the country are you from? Do you have children? Do they go to school?” But Sergeant Molina didn’t appear too keen to engage in any kind of conversation.

Then her radio started crackling. “Golf-Lima, Golf-Lima this is Alfa-Juliet, do you copy me? Over.” It was Sheila informing Laura that someone was heading to the police station to help with the situation. “When is the inspector’s going to be back?” Laura insisted. “Soon,” was the short reply.

At around twelve, a West African man entered the police station. “Are you Laura?” he asked. “I’m Fiao. Sheila sent me. Hallo Sergeant Molina, how are you?” Apparently Fiao was not new to this police station.

Laura briefly told Fiao about the incident. “Sergeant, we have a situation here,” said Fiao turning to Molina. “Let’s see what we can do about it. You know, these incidents have got to stop. Obstructing humanitarian work is a breach of the commitments made by the Angolan government.” “The Inspector will be back soon. He will take a decision,” were the only words uttered by the sergeant.

The wait continued but at least now Laura was no longer alone. Fiao explained that they had been having problems with the local police for the last few days. This was not normal. “Could it be money they want?” ventured Laura. “I think that if this was the case, the Sergeant would have let you know by now, before the Sub-Inspector returned,” replied Fiao.

Time was trickling slowly by. Anxiety became overlaid by exhaustion. Eventually, a man in uniform appeared at the entrance of the station and Sergeant Molina stood up. The Sub-inspector had arrived.

The sergeant briefed his superior and Laura noticed that during Molina’s account of what had happened, the inspector directed some hostile looks at the two foreigners. “So,” the inspector finally addressed Laura and Fiao. “What’s the problem here?”

The explanations began all over again. How Tiago was NGO staff, that he had been stopped while carrying out humanitarian tasks protected by international law and the Lusaka protocol, that the
government of Angola had committed itself to facilitating all work relating to the peace process, that he hadn’t committed any offence and that he should be released immediately. The conversation was calm. Laura was very careful to keep her mounting anger under strict control and Fiao acted like a seasoned diplomat.

“Who he works for and what he does is irrelevant here,” the Sub-inspector concluded when they had finished. “The guy has been travelling up and down Government and UNITA controlled territory.” Laura and Fiao were puzzled. “We know that UNITA has been infiltrating spies into the town,” said the Inspector. “Which means the guy stays in for questioning.” There was a note of finality in his words. “But Tiago is no spy!” was the only thing Laura was able to say. She was so distressed. “I want to see him,” she snapped.

Laura was taken to a filthy room at the back that had been transformed into a cell. The smell was unbearable and Tiago was sitting on the ground in one corner. She quickly updated him on the situation. “But I’m no spy,” cried Tiago. “I know, I know,” cried Laura. “Just resist, I’ll do everything I can to get you out of here.”

**UNAVEM Headquarters**

Back in her car, Laura followed Fiao to UNAVEM headquarters where they met Sheila. She confirmed that the police had indeed been acting in a very unfriendly way over the past few days. “I want to see the Regional UNAVEM Commander,” said Laura decisively. “Tiago has to be released.”

At two o’clock Laura found herself shaking hands with the Regional Commander, a Uruguayan Colonel. “I was informed that your driver had been stopped by the police,” he began. “He was arrested. They claim he is a spy,” Laura interrupted. As she explained what had happened the commander listened carefully. “I don’t know if I can do anything,” he told her when she had finished. “It seems that they want to make a point about this and your driver has been caught in the middle. Come back there tomorrow morning and let’s see if we can get something going.”

“But Tiago will have to spend the night in jail,” cried Laura. “I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do about that,” replied the Commander. “By the way, on the road here to Uige I saw military movement along the front line,” Laura remembered. “Yes, we have been receiving disturbing reports about this,” commented the Colonel as he ushered her out of the door. “Now just try not to worry too much.” But the drive back to Negage was a lonely one for Laura, her mind filled with fears for Tiago.

**April 24th**

The next morning saw Laura back on the road to Uige accompanied by Gilberto. “Don’t worry Laura,” he tried to encourage her. “We’ll get him out somehow.”
This time they saw no strange movements on the front line. By 9am they were in the Regional Commander’s office with a cup of coffee. “I have contacted a Colonel of Angolan Armed Forces,” the Regional Commander announced. “He recently arrived in Uige to start preparing for the integration of UNITA military forces into the regular army. He is well respected and might be able to help.”

A few minutes later, Colonel Da Silva entered the office. He appeared to be already knowledgeable about the situation. He went over the story again with Laura to clarify some of the details. “I don’t know if I can do anything. I have no authority over the police,” he told her. “But the Military have authority over everything in this country,” said the Regional Commander humorously. Colonel Da Silva smiled. “Still, I cannot interfere with police procedures.”

“Colonel,” began Laura. “I do appreciate your coming here today. Please understand the difficult position I find myself in. One of my staff has been arrested on... let’s say shaky grounds. I feel responsible for the people working for my organisation. We are able to carry out the work we do in the Quartering Area because we were able to build trust with the UNITA command – with the soldiers and personnel there. Trust that we will respond to the needs of the people under our care, and trust that we will stay out of politics.” Laura paused. “If we are not able to find a solution for our driver, then this could cast a shadow over the trust that is the pillar of our work.” “Not to mention the possible tensions the incident could provoke,” added Gilberto.

“I understand the possible implications,” replied Colonel Da Silva. “but I don’t see how I can intervene in this situation.” “Colonel,” stepped in the Regional Commander. “You are aware that the Lusaka Protocol tasked UNAVEM, among other things, to verify the free movement of people and goods. And, both the Government and UNITA have committed themselves to this. I understand you can do nothing officially, but possibly a gentle and informal reminder to some of your acquaintances might help ease the situation.”

For a few moments there was silence in the room. The Regional Commander had hinted at possible negative consequences if the situation was not resolved. Slowly Colonel Da Silva stood up saying, “Let me check a couple of things, and I’ll get back to you in a few hours.” Then addressing Laura he said, “I’ll soon be coming to Negage to start preparing for integration. I’ll see you again there.”

Laura spent the next couple of hours waiting in Sheila’s office with Gilberto, pretending to do some work. Around midday, a soldier entered the room and announced that the Regional Commander was waiting for them. They rushed out to see him. “If you go to the police station now,” the Regional Commander said, “I have been assured that you will find the police more cooperative.”

Gilberto and Laura dashed to the car and in no time were back inside the police station. Sergeant Molina and another officer were in the room. When he saw them, Molina nodded to the other
officer who went into the back room. A few moments later he returned with a shaken Tiago. It was obvious that he had been through a rough night.

Upon returning to the QA, Laura learned that the day before the Government had withdrawn from the Joint Commission and accused UNITA of “double dealing” (Exhibit 4).

Chapter 2: Another journey

May 2th

“Quebec-Alfa-One, Quebec-Alfa-One this is Hotel-Uniform do you copy me? Over. Quebec-Alfa-One, Quebec-Alfa-One this is Hotel-Uniform do you copy me? Over.” The radio was crackling.

Carlos, the radio operator, was just outside the communication tent. He rushed inside and picked up the mike. “Hotel-Uniform, Hotel-Uniform this is Quebec-Alfa-One I copy you four-by-five, send your message. Over.”

“Medical supplies for your Quartering Area arrived with the last flight, over.”

“Copy that, can you organise transport to our location? Over.”

“Negative, no vehicles are planning to come to your location, Over.”

“Stand-by, I'll check with our staff. Over.”

Carlos dashed out of the communication tent and ran towards the health post. “Laura! LAURA!” Carlos screamed. “I'm here,” her voice floated out of the tent. Carlos rushed in. “I have Uige airport on the radio. They say medical supplies have arrived for us but they cannot organise transport.”

“It must be the kit we ordered from Luanda ten days ago,” Laura murmured while dealing with a patient. “Tell them that one way or the other, we'll go and get the stuff.”

May 3rd, Back to Uige

“Tiago, please check the car, tomorrow morning we have to go to Uige.”

“Er... Donna Laura, I don't think that's a good idea,” he replied looking at his feet. “Why not? Do we have problems with the car?”

“Er, the car’s fine... but you know...” Tiago muttered. Laura looked at Tiago’s face. An eye that was now turning yellowish testified to his recent experience in Uige jail. Laura’s tone softened. “You don’t feel comfortable about driving me there.” It was not a question.
“Donna Laura, what if I get arrested again... What if this time you cannot get me out... What if... I have got a family.” Laura patted the man on the shoulder. “Okay, don’t worry Tiago.” Visibly relieved, he headed towards the communal tent.

Giulia was working on her computer in the office tent. The heat made the air heavy and humid. Laura poked her head into the tent. “How’s it going?” she asked. “Sweating,” was the distracted reply. “Can you come with me to Uige tomorrow?” asked Laura, adding “I need to pick up a health kit at the airport. Tiago doesn’t want to go.”

“You can hardly blame him. He went through shit.”

“I know, but we need to re-supply the health post.”

“Well, it’s a good excuse to leave this paperwork behind. And anyhow we do need to buy some food. I don’t want to see dry fish for the rest of my life! One last thing,” Giulia added. “I’ll drive!”

“Tiago mentioned that you were planning to go to Uige tomorrow.” Gilberto spoke to both Giulia and Laura during dinner in the communal tent. “Do you have UN driving licences?” “Yes,” they both replied.

“Well, take the UN car with radio equipment. I don’t feel comfortable about this trip. I want a radio check every 30 minutes, OK?” Laura and Giulia nodded.

May 4th

It was a stunning sunrise, as usual. “Somehow I can’t get used to the beauty of the sun rising and setting here,” said Giulia, “This place could be paradise.” “Indeed it could...” agreed Laura. Soon after breakfast Giulia and Laura hit the road. They wanted to leave plenty of time so they could get back before dark.
The road was not too bad. The tarmac had been ruined by years of neglect and heavy rains but the land cruiser had no problems going over the big holes it hit every now and then. Laura put on some music. There were no other vehicles on the road, just a few women with their children walking along by the side, carrying various goods on their heads. It was a pleasant drive. “I think it’s time for a radio check” announced Giulia. “Call the area and tell them we’re OK.” “Yes, before they send the entire peacekeeping force after us,” grinned Laura, picking up the mike.

An hour and a half later the women were entering Uige. “This is where Tiago got arrested last time.” Laura pointed at the police checkpoint. This time the UN-marked car was let through the police checkpoint without even a question being asked. “Let’s go first to the airport and then on to the market.” Laura proposed. They drove on the main road from the town and in few minutes were entering the airport perimeter. A blue helmet directed them to the MOVCON office for the usual paper work. In no time they were loading the ten boxes of the Health Kit in the back of the car. “Done!” said Giulia closing the back of the car. “Let’s get some food and get back.”

Within a couple of hours they had finished their shopping and were looking forward to getting back to the camp for a late lunch. Giulia was driving as fast as the road allowed. The further behind they left the town, the less vehicles there were on the road. Within 40 minutes they were approaching the front line at Senga. “Look there!” Laura pointed to the right of the road. A dozen soldiers were clambering out of a military truck. “Slow down Giulia.” “They look like government troops,” said Giulia “They shouldn’t be here, should they?” “Nope,” confirmed her friend.

Slowly they passed the post marking the front line. A few soldiers looked at the car but no one made any attempt to stop them. The moment the soldiers were out of sight, Giulia accelerated. And soon the car was climbing a gentle slope to the top of a small hill. As they reached the top Laura suddenly pointed down shrieking “What the fuck is that”. Giulia braked with a screech. “Call the camp. Right now!” yelled Laura.

The radio conversation was frantic. “We are approaching some kind of metallic wreckage blocking the road, nobody in sight.” “Go back, I repeat go back to Uige, do you copy me over?” Carlo's voice sounded tense. Giulia was already reversing. She almost had managed to turn the car when six men in military uniform with AK-47s emerged from the bush. “Oh shit,” whispered Laura.
The soldiers

“Stop the car and get out,” said one of them pointing the gun at Laura. Giulia switched off the engine and the two women got out of the car. “Where are you going?” continued the man. “To Negage Quartering Area,” replied Laura. “What are you carrying?” the man insisted. “Medical supplies for the health post there. We are humanitarian workers,” added Giulia showing the documents to prove what they were carrying and its purpose.

The soldier didn’t even look at the paper but ordered them to open the back door of the car. Laura tried to explain that the medicines would be used to treat their comrades. “That’s bullshit! You are probably selling this stuff to make money. Everybody knows our men are dying in the assembly areas because you don’t treat them!” Giulia could feel cold sweat dripping down her back.

Two other men had by then entered the back of the car and begun opening the boxes randomly. Quinine, paracetamol, folic acid – the boxes were carelessly thrown around.

“Golf-Lima, Golf-Lima this is Quebec-Alfa-One, do you copy me? Over.” The familiar voice of Carlos emerged from the radio. “Golf-Lima, Golf-Lima this is Quebec-Alfa-One, do you copy me? Over.” It was radio check time. Laura was yearning to reply but didn’t dare move. “Switch off the radio,” yelled the man. Giulia leaned inside the car and the friendly voice was cut off.

Scrutiny of the supplies inside the car continued in a disorderly fashion. Giulia and Laura ventured some feeble protests. “Mr Savimbi himself has committed the country to free circulation,” began Laura. By that point it was evident that the soldiers did not intend to harm the two women. If that had been the case, they would have been dead by now. “You are destroying medical supplies we need to assist your comrades.” Giulia pleaded, but the soldiers didn’t even bother to reply.

Then, as suddenly as they had appeared, the six men turned and disappeared into the bush. Laura and Giulia looked at each other; they were trembling. They went to look inside the car at the remains of their precious materials. The boxes had been opened and everything shaken out but a lot of the drugs were still there, casually thrown about. They picked up a couple of boxes that had fallen onto the road, got into the car and slammed the door.

Skirting the wreckage blocking the road they sped towards the camp. Via radio they informed the QA that they were all in one piece and few minutes later saw a car with Gilberto, the logistician and a couple of Indian soldiers speeding towards them.

Quickly they briefed the two men on what happened and both cars headed towards the QA. Upon their arrival Gilberto called an emergency meeting to which he invited Colonel Matos, the commander of UNITA troops quartered there.
Gilberto chaired the meeting, outlining how it was unacceptable that humanitarian workers were harassed and life-saving material damaged in UNITA-controlled territory. And all this in a UN-marked vehicle! This was a blatant breach of the Lusaka Protocol provisions as well as Humanitarian Law. Colonel Matos replied that it was impossible for the six soldiers to be genuine UNITA troops, since all fighting forces in the area had been disarmed and quartered. They were probably bandits, or a group of government people disguised to discredit UNITA. He would not accept responsibility for the incidents but would look into it.

At the end of the meeting Gilberto told Giulia and Laura that there had been a rising tensions throughout the country, and that all movements of QA personnel to Uige were momentarily suspended (Exhibit 4).

An inventory of the materials in the car showed that approx 20% of the drugs were missing.

Laura and Giulia wrote a confidential report to the head of the Demobilisation and Reintegration Office in Luanda about the incident (Exhibit 5). The perpetrators were never identified and UNITA denied any responsibility for the incident. Normal movement of humanitarian personnel resumed a week later.

**Epilogue**

Several months after these events, Laura was back in Italy. In her mind, she often went back to the events on the road to Uige. “With the wisdom of hindsight,” she told herself, “things appear clearer”. Now she could see the broader picture more clearly (Exhibit 4). But she still recalled the tension and flow of adrenalin that had seemed to influence all the decisions she had made at the time. “Would I do anything differently today?” Laura asked herself. And if she was honest with herself, she had to admit that she actually didn’t have an answer to this question.
Exhibit 1

Map of Angola

Source
University of Texas Library, Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection,
Exhibit 2

Quartering areas

A Quartering Area is basically a military camp divided into two main sections: One area where troops are disarmed and quartered and one administrative area where international personnel lives and where main facilities are located: storage, communication and office tents, and communal kitchens.

In a post-war environment there is usually a redundant number of military personnel (regular forces or otherwise). QAs are usually established to create a buffer time in which military personnel are counted, arms are collected and time is given to assess which individuals are going to be integrated in the unified national army and which ones will be discarded and oriented toward reintegration into civilian life.

It is also a time in which soldiers are given the opportunity to start thinking about options about their future life and being informed about the benefits and reintegration programmes provided by national and international authorities to facilitate reintegration. During quartering time soldiers are sustained by a national and international effort to provide decent living conditions through the provision of food, lodging, health care and similar.

It is a highly politically sensitive moment of an internationally sponsored peace process and what happens or doesn’t happens within a QA goes under intense scrutiny of the bodies overseeing the implementation of the peace agreements or of the conflicting parties.

In Angola, the humanitarian programmes within the quartering areas were directly negotiated by the UN Humanitarian Coordination Unit with UNITA. Quantities of food, type of health care, civic training and educational programmes were all subject to detailed and formal agreements between the UN and the UNITA leadership. QA management and leadership were tasked mainly to four individuals: The commander of the blue helmets battalion overseing the security of the area, the UNITA camp commander, the QA administrator, and the demobilisation and reintegration officer – both UN personnel.

In this framework, in each QA an NGO had responsibility for delivering services and implementing humanitarian programmes. Material and technical support was provided by different UN agencies. The agreement with the UN stated that each NGO will have to provide five experts. Specifically, a doctor, a nurse, a civic training administrator, a literacy officer and a logistic officer.

Programme implementation required a strict cooperation with UNITA local leadership and personnel. Activities can be summarised as follow:

a) Identification and registration of soldiers. It was the entry point to the DDR programme.
b) Food aid.

c) Non-food aid. Provided soldiers with a so-called ‘emergency kit’ containing: a mattress, a blanket, eating utensils and sanitary items (soap, razor, etc.).

d) Clothing.

e) Health assistance and sanitation. Each QA had its water system and health post that provided medical screening to all soldiers.

f) Civic training. It organised workshops and seminars on human rights and national reconciliations; it set up a literacy programme and organised recreational programme for soldiers.

Source

Exhibit 3

The peace process and UNAVEM III
The Lusaka Protocol established a Joint Commission. It was the highest political body of the peace process architecture. It was in charge of overseeing and negotiate on all aspects of the peace process. Members of the Joint Commission were: the UN as the chair and mediator, Government and UNITA representatives, the United States, Portugal and Russia as observers (the so-called Troika).

Any violation of the accord verified by the UN or reported by one of the parties would be discussed in the Joint Commission. “In practice the commission became a depositary for human rights and military violation reports but there was little inclination by the UN to publicise or denounce these incidents.” (i)

Humanitarian agenda
UNAVEM had the mandate to “coordinate, facilitate and support humanitarian activities directly linked to the peace process, in particular those relating to the quartering and demobilization of troops and their reintegration in civilian life”. (ii)

UNAVEM III – Functions
Established to assist the Government of Angola and the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) in restoring peace and achieving national reconciliation on the basis of the Peace Accords for Angola.

Among the main features of UNAVEM III’s mandate were:

- to provide good offices and mediation to the Angolan parties;
- to supervise, control and verify the disengagement of forces and to monitor the cease-fire;
- to verify information received from the Government and UNITA regarding their forces, as well as all troop movements;
- to assist in the establishment of quartering areas;
- to verify the withdrawal, quartering and demobilisation of UNITA forces;
- to supervise the collection and storage of UNITA armaments;
- to verify the movement of Government forces (FAA) to barracks and the completion of the formation of FAA;
- to verify the free circulation of persons and goods;
- to verify and monitor the neutrality of the Angolan National Police, the disarming of civilians, the quartering of the rapid reaction police, and security arrangements for UNITA leaders;
to coordinate, facilitate and support humanitarian activities directly linked to the peace process, as well as participating in mine-clearance activities;

to declare formally that all essential requirements for the holding of the second round of presidential elections have been fulfilled, and to support, verify and monitor the electoral process. (iii)

To carry out its mandate, the Security Council authorised for UNAVEM III the deployment of a maximum of “7,000 military personnel, in addition to the 350 military observers and 260 police observers mentioned in the Secretary-General’s report, with an appropriate number of international and local staff”. (iv)

UNAVEM III – structure

The Mission, with headquarters in Luanda, was headed by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (also chair of the Joint Commission), assisted by a Deputy Special Representative. The “Special Representative would have overall authority over all activities undertaken by the United Nations in Angola in support of the peace process and would be responsible for the close coordination of all of them”. (v)

The military component would be headed by a force commander. There were six regional headquarters located in Huambo, Lubango, Luena, Menongue, Saurimo and Uige. There would also be a Demobilisation and Reintegration Office of the Unit for Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to assist in quartering and demobilisation.

Regional commanders had the mandate to oversee the implementation of the Peace Protocol provisions in their region of competence. In particular they had to oversee the military agenda and support humanitarian activities relevant to the peace process in the area.

To monitor the fulfilment of the normalisation of State administration under the National Reconciliation agenda, it was considered necessary to establish small political units in each of the six regional headquarters. These units would contain also a human rights specialist.

Sources


iv) SC RES 976 1995. On the establishment of the UN Angola Verification Mission III. 8 February. Par. 1

Extract from Angola Peace Monitor

UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi has met with a series of high level delegations in which he gave assurances that the implementation of the peace process would be speeded up in the run up to the United Nations Security Council meeting on 8 May to decide whether to continue with its peacekeeping operation in Angola.

According to sources in Luanda, the dignitaries extracted assurances that at least 30,000, and possibly even 35,000, UNITA troops would be quartered by 8 May, the date when the UN Security Council meet in New York to discuss the future of the UN mission in Angola. The UNITA leader also gave assurances that the quality of weapons handed in to United Nations officials at the camps would improve.

It is expected that the mandate for the UN mission will only be renewed for three months or less to maintain the pressure on UNITA. It is unclear whether any discussion will take place at the Security Council meeting over the implementation of existing sanctions on UNITA.

Patience strained over UNITA’s failure to quarter its troops

Both international and internal goodwill is fast disappearing as UNITA once again has failed to send substantial numbers of its armed forces to be quartered and disarmed prior to their demobilisation.

The second phase of the confinement of UNITA troops began on 25 March, with personnel moving into Ngove, Ntuco and Quibala quartering areas. The latest net figure, including deaths and desertions, was 20,900 on 26 April. As of 17 April 22,000 troops had been quartered in the following areas: Vila Nova 5,007; Londuimbali 5,202; Negage 5,008; Quibaxe 2,148; Quibala 931; Ngove 3,177; Ntuco 519

UN rejects UNITA leader’s criticisms of conditions

UNITA leader, Jonas Savimbi, has complained of a lack of medicines, tents and food, and that "the UN have not positively fulfilled their promises".

This viewpoint was vigorously rejected by the UN Secretary General’s Special Representative in Angola, Alioune Blondin Beye. He said on Televisiao Popular de Angola on 21 March that "the international community has established adequate conditions in the confinement centres – at a very high financial cost and with great sacrifice. We visited the areas and found them suitable and acceptable. They have clean water, tents and food, according to universal norms. The
soldiers have three meals a day, medicine, doctors and nurses. I therefore believe it is not fair to accuse the international community of bad faith. These accusations are baseless.”

**Head of UN warns of poor quantity and quality of those quartered**

The UN Secretary General, Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in his report to the Security Council on 4 April (S/1996/248) stated that 1,163 of those quartered have subsequently deserted the camps. Some of those have since claimed that they were press-ganged by UNITA solely to make up the numbers in the camps. One unconfirmed estimate is that between 35 and 40% of those quartered were rounded up into UNITA forces for the purposes of making up numbers for quartering, leaving most of UNITA’s fighting units intact. It is understood that of those quartered, most are made up of local UNITA militia rather than battle-hardened troops.

On the subject of arms, a military expert has informed ACTSA that UNITA is not handing over heavy weaponry, and that few of the weapons handed over are the sophisticated US and South African hardware in UNITA’s possession.

**Angolan Government withdraws from Joint Commission**

In a serious sign of frustration with UNITA prevarication, the Angolan Government has suspended its participation in the Joint Commission which oversees the peace process.

On 23 April the Government announced that it was suspending its participation in the Joint Commission until UNITA had clarified its position on the quartering of its troops, and on whether Jonas Savimbi would accept the offer of Vice-Presidency of the country. A senior Government source said that after delays and UNITA’s "double-dealing", the Government had decided that "enough is enough", until UNITA had resumed "serious dealing". However, meetings seem likely to start again if UNITA meets its target of quartering 30,000 troops by 8 May.

**President of UN Security Council speaks out on UNITA delays**

Despite the usage of diplomatic language, the President of the Security Council, the Chilean Ambassador Juan Somavia, has pointed the finger of guilt at UNITA for holding up the peace process.

In a statement read out on behalf of the Security Council on 24 April, the President stated that "the Security Council notes that the Uniao Nacional para a Independencia Total de Angola (UNITA) has quartered more than 20,000 of its forces, but expresses concern over delays in the quartering of UNITA troops and urges UNITA to move expeditiously to achieve full quartering of its troops. The Council expresses concern about the quality of weapons surrendered by UNITA and urges UNITA to fulfil its commitment to turn over all of its arms, ammunition, and military equipment as the quartering process continues. It reiterates that the quartering process is a
crucial component of the peace process and stresses the need for quartering to be credible and fully verifiable”.

**Oxfam official murdered**

An official of Britain's aid organisation OXFAM was murdered along with two military observers whilst travelling in a vehicle between Cubal and Benguela on 3 April.

A UNAVEM-led team will go to the site of the attack to investigate the incident. UNITA issued a communique stating that it "would like to condemn in the strongest terms this act of pure vandalism". The head of Angola's army, General Joao de Matos said on 10 April that "these attacks are carried out by bandits and we must prevent them when they are carried out in government- or UNITA-controlled territory".

The London-based journal "Southscan" stated on 12 April that the attack was carried out by UNITA troops.

**Source**

[http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Urgent_Action/apic5196.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Urgent_Action/apic5196.html)
Laura and Giulia’s report

To: CS, Director of the Demobilisation and Reintegration Office - Luanda
From: Laura M., Giulia D. Negage Quartering Area
Date: 5 May 1996
Object: Incident on Uige-Negage road

CONFIDENTIAL

Dear CS,

As required we submit a report on the incident that occurred two days ago while we were returning to Negage from Uige. We also include some of our thoughts about what happened.

Kind regards,
GD&LM

Description of the incident

On 4 May we were travelling in a UN marked vehicle returning from Uige where we had gone to collect a health kit. A few Km. after Senga, we found the road obstructed by metallic wreckage. While we were trying to turn the car round to go back to Uige, six uniformed man armed with AK-47s came at us out of the bush.

They ordered us to leave the car and then thoroughly searched it and ransacked the health kit we were carrying. About 20% of the material was stolen.

Though were aggressive, we never had the impression that they had any intention of harming us.

The one who seemed the leader of the group accused us of selling the drugs on the private market for personal profit, and accused us of not providing proper assistance to quartered soldiers.

We were able to return to QA unharmed.

Comments

The six individuals seemed well trained with a clear line of command. They definitely did not look or behave like common criminals. Part of the material was damaged, but robbery did not seem their main purpose. In fact, the majority of the drugs and the health equipment were left behind despite the fact that good money can be made selling reliable drugs on the private market in Negage.

Colonel Matos insisted that they were probably Government people disguised as UNITA. However, we both think they were actual...
UNITA personnel following clear orders. We do not know the reasons behind this attack, but it does reveal that UNITA has not quartered its entire troop in this region, nor has it surrendered all its arms. If we were to speculate, we feel that the attack was not directly aimed at us as NGO members, and we don’t think that our security is now immediately at risk.

Source: Private archive of the author

Notes