The end of the war

the Luena Memorandum of Understanding

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On 22 February 2002 the leader of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) Jonas Savimbi was killed by government military forces, and soon after television images of his corpse were being beamed around the world. The government’s military drive to defeat UNITA had claimed its most prized victim. Having resisted increasing calls domestically and internationally for new talks with UNITA, the government stood at a crossroads, apparently in a strong position to choose whether to try to force a complete UNITA surrender or to engage in some form of peace talks. UNITA, fractured and reeling, faced even tougher choices. This article examines how the parties responded to the chance to end the war, and asks how the decisions that led to the signing of the Luena Memorandum on 4 April 2002 might have shaped Angola’s future.

Steps towards talks

Three days after Savimbi’s death, while military operations continued in Angola, President Dos Santos was in Lisbon discussing the situation with the Portuguese government. There he made a public statement indicating that a ceasefire was the next step, before flying to Washington, where he would meet President George W. Bush and other high ranking US officials, and then Ibrahim Gambari, UN Under Secretary for African Affairs. On 2 March, the government confirmed that it would contact UNITA to prepare the ground for a ceasefire.

Initial reports following Savimbi’s death had suggested UNITA was determined to fight on, but the sense of impending defeat deepened with the news of Vice President António Dembo’s death. There were rumours that he was killed by fellow UNITA fighters because not being Ovimbundu made him an unacceptable choice as leader, but other reports claimed that he was diabetic and had lost his medication. UNITA’s Secretary-General
and reputed hard-liner, General Paulo Lukamba “Gato”, effectively became leader, in his role as ‘coordinator’ of a newly formed Management Committee.

Discreet contacts between the warring parties followed, and a public breakthrough came on 13 March when the government declared a unilateral cessation of offensive military movements and presented a ‘Peace Plan’ (see Key texts and agreements). It called for the resolution of outstanding military issues in accordance with the Bicesse Accords and Lusaka Protocol, UNITA’s demilitarization and reintegration into political life, and an amnesty for all crimes committed in the framework of the armed conflict. It also pledged to work with all society, especially the churches, political parties, and civil society groups. The plan came as a surprise but was widely welcomed. The National Assembly had not been consulted or involved. The UN Secretary-General’s Representative in Angola, Mussagy Jeichande, expressed satisfaction with the peace plan, considering it “conciliatory”. The Catholic bishops welcomed the government’s “benevolent language and gesture”, and the independent media also reacted warmly.

**The UNITA problem**

The move appeared to bolster the prospects of a settlement. However, there was more than one UNITA to deal with. The government approach was nominally a two-track policy of discussing military issues with UNITA commanders in the bush and political issues with the UNITA-Renovada (UNITA-R) faction of the rebel movement, whom they had long recognized as the legitimate UNITA. However, UNITA-R, who were widely seen as stooges who had been co-opted into the Government of National Unity and Reconciliation, had little legitimacy with the organization’s members in the bush, UNITA’s external (overseas) representatives or other MPs. In practice, the absence of a coherent and unified UNITA was an opportunity for the government to limit any agreement to a narrowly military one with military counterparts, putting political issues on the backburner.

A communiqué from UNITA-R announced a commission for the reunification of the party, but this was little more than posture. Meanwhile there was a serious split between UNITA’s Management Committee in the bush and its external wing. While the government recognized UNITA’s military leadership as its negotiating partner, many in the party feared that they were little more than prisoners with no choice but to sign a surrender dressed up as a peace agreement. 46 of UNITA’s 70 MPs issued a statement backing the external wing as the only body with sufficient legitimacy to represent the movement to the UN in order to conclude the peace process.

The wider public also began to express reservations about the nature of imminent negotiations. There were calls for national and foreign journalists and civil society activists to have access to the talks and to the UNITA people involved, or at least to have UN or Troika observers, to increase credibility. Three days after the
announced the government peace plan, the Angolan Civic Association (ACA) called in an open letter for the elaboration of a plan that went beyond a military agreement and the accommodation of UNITA to address the problems of the nation in the current phase of the transition to democracy.

A government spokesman responded that the presence of third parties such as the church or the UN would be confusing at this stage, but left the possibility open for later involvement. Speaking for UNITA’s Management Committee, General Dachala backed this position.

Preliminary talks in Cassamba

Preliminary talks between the FAA and UNITA Generals started on 15 March in the town of Cassamba in Moxico province. One newspaper reported that FAA General “Impalacável” had had two days exploratory meeting with Gato at the UNITA base in Moxico, but it was General Samuel Chiviale who led the UNITA delegation at the talks. Importantly, a former UNITA General who had changed sides in 1993 and had led recent military operations, Geraldo Sachipenda Nunda (Deputy Chief of Staff of the FAA) led the government delegation for the preliminary talks. He reportedly was able to establish a good rapport with his former colleagues.

The government characterized the situation as one of working out technical military matters. The sides agreed that the FAA should be responsible for the organization and provision of all logistical and technical means necessary for the talks, including the transport of UNITA delegates to the venue. It was agreed that the provincial capital Luena, the town with government facilities closest to the battlefield, was a practical place to hold further negotiations. The prospect for a definitive cessation of hostilities appeared promising. The FAA’s General Nunda and UNITA’s Chief of Staff General Abreu “Kamorteiro” signed a ceasefire ‘pre-accord’ at Cassamba on 18 March. There continued to be reports of fighting in different parts of the country, but the government minimized their importance, insisting it was due only to a “lack of information” getting to the fighting elements.

However, at this point UNITA’s military wing had not yet managed to pull the rest of UNITA’s disparate elements into line. UNITA’s external wing was not prepared to remain in the dark. A member of the external wing in Lisbon, Carlos Morgado, said soon after the Cassamba talks began that they were “a farce. … That entire scenario … was intended to be sold to the international community as if there was an agreement coming”. He said that the negotiating UNITA representatives had been captives and not attended voluntarily to the talks.

UNITA sources in Portugal also indicated that their representative in Paris, Isabel Samakuva, had been elected as interim UNITA leader.

An apparently conciliatory move from Samakuva came on 18 March when he appealed to churches, civil society and opposition parties to guarantee a dignified peace and asked for clarification from the government about the status of Gato and other UNITA Generals negotiating with the FAA. After a long phone conversation with Gato, Samakuva admitted to having more confidence in the seriousness of the talks though he complained that UNITA had no means of communication between its internal and external elements.

The organization’s Europe-based elements eventually issued a statement expressing their full support to the leadership of General Gato and giving the negotiating team a clearer mandate to come to an agreement. By 25 March, 55 of the 70 Luanda-based MPs backed a declaration in full support of Gato and his Management Committee – the other 15 being followers of Eugénio Manuvakola of UNITA-Renovada.

Progress in Luena

The second round of talks began on 20 March in Luena. Both sides were optimistic that peace was within their grasp. Kamorteiro said that “many politicians have used the same expression, but I am not a politician, I am a soldier, so when I speak of peace I really mean it.”

The UNITA team included the main Generals, and this time it was headed by Marcial Dachala, Information Secretary, and Alcides Sakala, Secretary for Foreign Affairs (both earlier considered dead). Gato was again absent, but later claimed that the UNITA negotiating team was in regular contact with him at his base somewhere in Moxico in order to harmonize their positions.

During talks, the government news services reported a very good atmosphere between the negotiators, with UNITA delegation members in free and friendly chats with their FAA partners and with members of the public. Kamorteiro was reported seen openly driving around Luena roads in his jeep, and his colleagues spotted at discos and night clubs.

On 23 March FAA regional military commanders joined the talks, and on 25 March the talks were suspended for consultations. There was still some nervousness from abroad. The ‘external mission’ asked the government for the venue of the talks to be changed to a location with better access for press and other observers (i.e. Luanda), and with greater scope for monitoring by the UN and the Troika as foreseen in the Lusaka Protocol.
Talks were dominated by the technicalities of a ceasefire and the detailed definition of all aspects related to the quartering and demobilization of UNITA’s forces. A Joint Military Commission (CMM) was formed, with observer status for the UN and the Troika as well as a technical group consisting of military experts from the FAA and UNI, and UN and Troika representatives. In accordance with the status of the negotiations as military talks, political issues such as the role of UNITA leaders in state and government structures, vacant parliamentary seats, and longer-term issues such as elections and the constitution were left for later.

The military agreement was signed on 30 March, paving the way for the official signing on 4 April. It had been widely expected that Gato would sign for UNITA, but he failed to attend. Journalists in Luena were initially told that the helicopter sent to fetch him could not land because of heavy rain. When the helicopter arrived, it was carrying the former UNITA Commander-in-Chief General Samuel Chiwale who claimed that Gato “had too much work” to allow him to attend. Chiwale assured reporters that General Gato would be present at the ceremony in Luanda on Thursday 4 April which would be witnessed by Gambari and the Troika ambassadors. On that day, the two Commanders-in-Chief (Armando da Cruz Neto and Kamorteiro) signed the Memorandum. Dispelling any fears of a Savimbi-like snub to the agreement, Gato attended and was received by Dos Santos after the ceremony.

The sense that the Luena Memorandum had been a pact between two parties to the exclusion of other political forces remained. While it succeeded in ending the war, and not withstanding the warm words of the peace plan, it left other political and social forces out in the cold. On 3 April, the eve of the signing ceremony, President dos Santos gave a speech to the nation about forgiving and forgetting, national reconciliation, reconstruction, and care for those in need. In response, the leader of the National Front for the Liberation of Angola, Holden Roberto – the only surviving leader of Angola’s three original liberation movements – called for a commission to prepare “a national dialogue without exclusion” to guarantee peaceful transition to democracy and national reconstruction.

The agreed amnesty provisions heightened the sense of an exclusive two-party pact. UNITA and the FAA were granted a blanket amnesty by parliament, approved unanimously days before the signing. It was the first time that a proposal was passed unanimously by the Assembly, but the reaction from observers was less warm. On 11 April Gambari met with Gato and reiterated that the UN would not recognize the amnesty since war crimes had to be prosecuted. The amnesty was also questioned by 63 smaller political parties in a letter to the President. Gato (and even Holden Roberto) considered Gambari’s intervention unwelcome and as potentially destabilizing of the prevailing positive mood.

The new era

The Luena Memorandum marked the end of the war. A period of further engagement between the sides began. Following the first meeting of the CMM soon after the signing, Nunda reported that there had been no violations of the ceasefire. Members of the CMM and technical group were presented to the press, and the UNITA contingent confirmed the report. Eventually the CMM was deemed inadequate to complete all tasks beyond those of a military nature, so the Joint Commission from Lusaka was resurrected for a few months in late 2002, being wound up in November, soon after which the UN lifted the remaining sanctions on UNITA.

While UNITA had entered the talks divided, the path to its reunification as a coherent political party was becoming clear. The UNITA delegation that arrived in the capital for the formal signing met with UNITA-R leader Manuvakola, who publicly pledged not to interfere with the talks, reportedly allowing “UNITA to represent UNITA.” Over the following months, UNITA moved towards reunification.

Although some may say it is a dubious claim, the day before the ceasefire was signed Gato warned that “the war could have continued.” It is not possible to know whether he was right, but the reasons to negotiate were compelling. The events following February 2002 can be seen as the logical adjunct to a military campaign, where both sides had something to gain by negotiating an end to military activity. The government’s restraint in not openly declaring victory was judicious. The course of events could be interpreted as a series of skilful manoeuvres by the MPLA government, who managed to convey the impression of a conciliatory conclusion to the war without conceding any power.

The question for Angola is what could have been if the process had been defined in broader terms – as an opportunity not just for ending military hostilities in a negotiated manner, but for opening the process to broader political renewal – in consultation with the unarmed political parties and civil society. Would this have been a better foundation for more profound democratization and deeper reconciliation, which could have addressed Angola’s underlying problems more successfully? Given the structures of power, this kind of opening was probably never really on the cards, but it may be Angola’s loss that such a process was never given a chance.