

Ministry of National Defence
PORTUGUESE COMMISSION OF MILITARY HISTORY

ACTA 2024

*The role of the military in political transitions:
from the 18th century to the present day*

XLIX International Congress of Military History

1 - 6 September 2024, Lisbon

Volume II





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Published by:

Portuguese Commission of Military History

Av. Ilha da Madeira, n.º 1, Room 332

1400-204 Lisboa - Portugal

Coordinator and editor: Jorge Silva Rocha, PhD

Cover Design: Jorge Silva Rocha

Book cover images: Alfredo Cunha (*front*) and Eduardo Gageiro (*back*)

ISBN: 978-989-8593-31-3

DOI for this volume: <https://doi.org/10.56092/VXIU5336>

Printed in Portugal by Rainho & Neves - Artes Gráficas

THE UN MISSION IN NAMIBIA, THE SUCCESS OF THE TRANSITION

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Abstract

In the conceptualization of UN missions, transition applies to some specific cases in the broader framework of peace and stability operations, such as decolonization or, indeed, the transition from one political system to another. From this perspective, the mission in Namibia can be considered the first of a long list of missions, set up especially after the Cold War, when the new international scene allowed to solve frozen situations. UNTAG (UN Transition Assistance Group) paved the way for this kind of specific profile of peace missions. Even if the doctrine established two main profiles, peace keeping or peace enforcement, this profile has elements of both. However also where largely formed by military and police personnel, the missions considered in some specific situations, the exclusive presence of civilian personnel. The mission in Namibia established the doctrinal format for these operations: after the political agreement, the deployment of the mission should be focused in securing the area and allowing the free and fair elections/referendums. The work had as focus to remember that the UN work, sometime is successful and it is a model that could be re-proposed also under a multinational framework, as initially was in East Timor (another former colony which fought for their independence). The transition, however it is a complicate exercise that even if with different parameters is still present today, but suffer of the attacks to the multilateralism, which impact as well on the entire peacekeeping/enforcement landscape.

Key words: United Nations, decolonization, self-determination, Namibia, military, East Timor

Introduction

In the conceptualization of UN missions, transition applies to some specific cases in the broader framework of peace and stability operations, such as decolonization or, indeed, the transition from one political system to another.

From this perspective, the mission in Namibia – UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) can be assimilated to the missions in the former Spanish Sahara (MINURSO), Cambodia (UNAMIC/UNTAC), Central America (MINUGUA, ONUVEN, ONUCA/ONUSAL), Mozambique (ONUMOZ) and Angola (UNAVEM I, II, II, UNOA), Eritrea (UNOVER), and South Africa (UNOMSA).

It is useful to recall that among those were some of an exclusively civilian natures, like the ones in Nicaragua and South Africa, tasked to supervise free and fair elections, as cornerstone marking the transition from one political system to another.

All these missions have had different results, but one is still in existence since 1991, the MINURSO, underlining the failure of its original objectives, while the UNTAG, due to the speed of its execution and the results obtained, can be cited as a complete success and guaranteed a smooth transition.

The context

The reduction of the confrontation between East and West in the second half of the 1980s had consequences on all the structures of international relations and, consequently, the maintenance of peace also underwent a remarkable evolution, moving away from the canons that had characterized it for thirty years.

The most relevant fact, in addition to the numerical explosion, was the geographical spread with missions also deployed in areas once in the area of exclusive influence of one or another Superpower such as Afghanistan for the USSR or Central America for the USA.

As consequence, from 1989 to 1995 there was a considerable increase in UN interventions to protect international peace and stability.

Increase relating to both the dimensional and functional aspects of these missions and has allowed a new, more modern and broader vision of the concept of peace operations.

A “cold case”

The supervision of the transition to independence of the former German colony in South West Africa was entrusted to the UNTAG (United Nations Transition Assistance Group), a body established on 29 September 1978 with UNSCR 435.

This territory, a former German colony, had been occupied and administered by South Africa since 1916 and was assigned to the same country as a mandate by the League of Nations as territory of category 'C'.

Once the Second World War ended and the decolonization process began, the UN, which considers itself the successor body to the League of Nations, tried to convince Pretoria to grant independence to that territory which instead aimed to annex it.

In 1966 armed movements against South Africa presence began and the end of the Portuguese colonialism in Angola gave a strong boost to these armed movements, very close to the USSR; the SWAPO, South West Africa People's Organisation was the leader of the independence movement.

The UNTAG was established after years of useless diplomatic pressure, which resulted in three special sessions of the UN General Assembly, the 5th in 1967, the 9th in 1978, the 14th in 1986 and the 8th emergency in 1981.

The South African governments attempted to since 1946 to block the process of emancipation of that territory by not recognizing, in this case the automatic absorption of the mandated powers of the dissolved League of Nations to the United Nations, as 'trusteeship territory'.

South Africa, for various reasons, such as racial hostility, mining interests, opposition to the African independence movements that were progressively taking power in the former British and Portuguese colonies of Southern Africa, almost all close to the Soviet Union.

However, only the evolution of the international framework and the start of dialogue between the USA and the USSR brought UNTAG out of a virtual condition to the real world.

In fact, US pressure convinced South Africa to accept the UN's involvement in the SWA/Namibia issue and it was possible to make the mission operational, theoretically established eight years earlier but never going beyond a small office at the UN HQ in New York, and deployed the first elements on the ground following the adoption of the UNSCR 632 from 16 February 1989.

The mission had the mandate:

- to guarantee security for free and fair elections that would establish independence;
- monitor the permanence of the former warring parties units in the designated assembly centers;

- ensure the orderly and peaceful withdrawal of South African forces from the territory;
- the disarmament of the independence groups of SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization) and of the local forces established during the South African mandate, the SWATF, such as the 'koevoet', the counterinsurgency branch of the SWAPOL;
- assist in the establishment of new armed forces and police based on civilian leadership, multi-ethnic and democratic basis;
- supervise the installation of the provisional civil government.

All these were translated in the implementation of the principle of 'limited trusteeship', in this case already initially foreseen, and which was fully applied in Cambodia, leading even to the adoption of a provisional flag).

The UNTAG military contingent saw the deployment of 4200 'blue helmets', out of 7000 planned, and 300 UNMOs, to which were added 1500 UNCIVPOL (today named UNPOL) and 2000 civilians (internationally and locally recruited) and began to deploy in April 1989.

The elections, monitored by another 1000 short-term civilian observers, took place on 11 November 1989 and saw the victory of the political element of SWAPO, the South African forces quickly withdrew and the UN troops were withdrawn in March-April 1990.

The military component consisted of infantry battalions from Malaysia, Kenya, Finland.

Other 4 infantry battalions from Sweden, Yugoslavia, Bangladesh and Togo, initially foreseen, instead remained in reserve in their respective countries and were not deployed both for financial reasons and because the essentially calm military situation did not require the strengthening of the military apparatus.

Logistics and support departments were provided by Great Britain (signal), Australia (engineers), Poland (logistic), Italy (8 AB 205 helicopters and 92 men [Helitaly] and 8 Carabinieri, included in the multinational military police unit), Spain (with C212 'Aviocar' light aircraft), Denmark (MovCon), Canada and Switzerland (medic).

The UNMOs came from Bangladesh, Czechoslovakia, Finland, Ghana, India, Ireland, Yugoslavia, Kenya, Malaysia, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, Poland, Sudan, Togo.

UNCIVPOL officers were seconded from Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Canada, Egypt, Fiji, GDR (30 of the Volk Polizei, the first and last UN operation of the dying East Germany), Federal Germany (50 elements of the BundesGrenzschutz, today BundesPolizei), Guyana, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Kenya, Holland, Nigeria, Norway, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, Sweden, Tunisia, Hungary, led by an Irish police officer.

Federal Germany provided civilian vehicles and mechanics, Switzerland (not yet part of the UN) other than a medical unit, also 3 liaison planes, Greece various logistical equipment, Japan financial support, the USA ensured air transport to the various national contingents.

Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, GDR, Federal Germany, Ghana, India, Ireland, Japan, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Singapore, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago and USSR provided electoral observers.

In the first days of its stay, the mission recorded considerable tensions, due to the excesses of extremist elements of PLAN, the military wing of SWAPO, but the UN forces, still in the deployment phase, were unable to maintain order and only the threat of a new intervention by the SADF led those elements to return to the designated assembly centers.

UNTAG, which positioned its HQ in Windhoek, the capital of the territory, no longer experienced any problems.

The mission recorded several peculiarities: the Swedish contingent, although officially in reserve, in reality was not deployed due to the lack of approval of the South African government, which considered the personnel prejudicially oriented in an anti-South African sense and therefore not impartial.

Furthermore, Finland, which had always strictly respected the trade embargo with South Africa, notified the UN of the need to derogate from it to purchase wheeled transport and combat vehicles produced in that nation ('Kasspir', 'Hippo', 'Rhino', 'Buffel') and equip their units, which had to operate in a heavily mine-infested environment and those vehicles were designed to withstand the effects of that type of ordnance.

Transition models comparison between UN and multilateral operations: parallelism and differences between Namibia and Timor Leste

The transition processes, carried out by military forces, was not the exclusive domain of the United Nations, but also of the 'coalition of willing'.

The example, hereby briefly cited, for the similarities and differences with UNTAG, is that of INTERFET, which accompanied East Timor to independence after twenty years of Indonesian military occupation and the attempt of Jakarta to illegally annex it.

Independence was the fundamental sticking point in Timor Leste, but not in Namibia, where it had already been agreed by all the parties in the settlement plan;

The Namibian settlement was strongly underpinned by the interests of major local, regional and global players, while the Timor Leste process was not;

The Namibian process was preceded by lengthy negotiations in which the idea on an independence referendum had long figured prominently, while in relation to Timor Leste, the holding of a popular vote had come to look likely only very late in the day;

The Namibian process received strong external support from a united UNSC, reflecting its role in the disengagement of Cold War antagonists from proxy wars.

The Timor Leste process was not so strategically significant but it was relevant for the major regional powers as Australia.

The Namibian operation had a very long gestation period, which gave time for detailed UN preparation for the mission, and also for the internal parties to reconcile themselves to the shape of the things to come.

This factor was totally absent for the operation in Timor Leste, planned, prepared and deployed in very short time;

The Namibian settlement plan was comprehensive in nature, addressing military and civilian issues effectively.

It was obvious by April 1999 that any agreements preceding the Timor Leste popular consultation would be much sparser;

The UN had a strong mandate in Namibia: although the referendum was conducted by the incumbent south African- appointed administration the SRSG was empowered to stop the process at any stage.

UNTAG had a strong military and police presence, with a serious deterrence capability.

In Timor Leste the UN mission had no military component, and, ultimately, a limited police mandate, not in condition to stop the violence of the Indonesian forces and settlers against the Timorese people.

The INTERFET, an Australian-led powerful multinational force had a strong deterrent power and blocked any return of violence, monitored the withdrawal of Indonesian forces and the resettling of the Indonesian civilians, paving the way for the UN follow-on-force, a largely 'rehabbed' INTERFET, which ensured the establishment of a new independent state based on the self-determination;

The UN enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy among the masses in Namibia, arising from its long support for their struggle for freedom and independence.

Even those in Namibia who had been on the other of the struggle came to accept the UN's role- increasingly so as time went by.

In Timor Leste it was clear that there were significant, powerful and violent players, like Indonesia, who could be expected to offer strong resistance to the UN's role.

Namibia was not a particularly difficult territory in which to deploy a mission.

The basic infrastructure network was excellent, and as English, the working language of UN missions.

In Timor Leste, the infrastructure was much more rudimentary, and the local languages were not widely spoken outside the territory.

The timeframe within which Namibian process had to be concluded was a realistic one: self-determination referendum was held seven months after the deployment of the UN mission.

In Timor Leste, much more had to be done on the referendum vote, in less than half the time of Namibia.

Finally, and in general, the Namibian operation proceeded in conditions of security, and UN staff faced few threats.

In Timor Leste, it again appeared likely that threat levels were consistently high and uniquely originated by pro Indonesian elements.

Conclusion

The concept of transition operations, especially in the context of decolonization answers include, other than a coherent political framework and support, a deterrence capability responsible for securing the territory and surveillance of the bases of the cantoned opposing forces; this while awaiting the referendum vote and assisting, the conduct of a 'free and fair', as required by the UN, vote.

But UNTAG had indirect success beyond its borders, as it strengthened the negotiation processes, especially in Angola and Mozambique and, above all, in the much larger and more complex Cambodia.

In all the cases, in reality the UN action enjoyed a positive international landscape, which allowed the international organization to achieve what it was decided elsewhere.

On the contrary, MINURSO, modelled on UNTAG and with the same hopes from the UN to close the file of the former Spanish Sahara in few months and close the file of decolonization in Africa, remained stuck between the different visions of the parties, and today barely survives.

Glossary

GDR – German Democratic Republic

HQ - Headquarters

INTERFET – International Force for East Timor

MINUGUA – Misión de Verificación de las Naciones Unidas en Guatemala

MINURSO – Misión de las Naciones Unidas para el referéndum en el Sahara Occidental

MINUSAL – Misión de Naciones Unidas en Salvador

MONUA - Missão de observação das Nações Unidas em Angola

MovCon – Movement Control

ONUCA – Observadores de las Naciones Unidas en Centro America

ONUMOZ – Operação das Nações Unidas em Moçambique

ONUSAL - Observadores de las Naciones Unidas en El Salvador

ONUVEN – Observadores de las Naciones Unidas para la Verificación de Elecciones en Nicaragua

PLAN - People's Liberation Army of Namibia

SADF – South Africa Defence Forces

SRSO – Special Representative of the UN' Secretary-General

SWAPO - South West Africa People's Organization

SWAPOL – Sout West Africa Police

SWATF - South West African Territorial Force

UNAVEM I, II, II – UN Angola Verification Mission

UNCIVPOL – UN Civilian Police

UNMO – UN Military Observer

UNOA – UN Office in Angola

UNOL – UN Office in Liberia

UNOMSA – UN Observer Mission in South Africa

UNOVER – UN Observer Mission to Verify the Referendum in Eritrea

UNPOL – UN Police

UNSCR – UN Security Council Resolution

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DOI for this text: <https://doi.org/10.56092/QGWT9339>