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South Africa Seeks Soldiers' Return

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JOHANNESBURG, May 24 — South Africa today requested an urgent meeting with Angola to discuss the return of South African soldiers reported killed or taken prisoner in what appears to have been an abortive covert mission in northern Angola. There was no immediate word of an Angolan reply.

On Thursday, South Africa acknowledged for the first time that it had sent troops into northern Angola, saying that they were on a spy mission.

Angola, however, said Wednesday night that two South Africans were killed and one was taken prisoner when they were ambushed as they tried to sabotage American-run oil installations in Cabinda, a province sandwiched between Congo and Zaire.

In a statement today, the South African Foreign Minister, Roelof F. Botha, defended the mission, saying Pretoria had expressed "grave concern" to Angola a year ago about a purported buildup of African National Congress rebels in that country.

The African National Congress is the most prominent of exiled movements seeking to overthrow white minority rule in South Africa. Mr. Botha said South Africa had evidence that northern Angola had become the main training area for the rebels.

Botha Sees 'Direct Threat'

He said African National Congress personnel in Angola "pose a direct threat" to the people of South Africa. The statement also asserted that Angola was still permitting the insurgent South-West Africa People's Organization to make attacks from Angola in the group's campaign to end South Africa's control of South-West Africa, also known as Namibia.

Mr. Botha said South Africa had no alternative "but to take whatever action it deems appropriate" to protect itself.

The statement did not refer to Angolan statements that the soldiers were intercepted as they moved to sabotage oil installations in Cabinda. The installations, operated by a subsidiary of the Gulf Oil Corporation, provide much of Marxist-ruled Angola's foreign exchange and help it finance the presence of about 25,000 Cuban soldiers on its soil. Angola says the Cubans are there to help protect the country from a South African invasion.

On Thursday, Gen. Constand Viljoen, commander of the South African armed forces, said contact had been lost with a small group of soldiers in northern Angola. In his statement today, Mr. Botha acknowledged that "a small team of South Africans apparently clashed with Angolan military personnel."

Uproar Over Incident

The incident has caused an uproar in South Africa, with one liberal newspaper, The Cape Times, calling the episode "The Cabinda Fiasco."

"The news from Angola is bewildering," the newspaper said in an editorial, "and the consequences in regional diplomacy and relations with the West are incalculable."

In Washington, the State Department said Thursday that it deplored the incident, which could have a chilling effect on South African-United States ties if it turns out that an American-run oil installation was a sabotage target.

Angola termed the incident "part of a vast plan of economic and political destabilization against Angola."

South Africa's critics now seem certain to argue that the white authorities have reverted to hard-line tactics toward potentially hostile neighbors after a year of agreements aimed at easing tensions.

South Africa signed the agreements last year with both Angola and Mozambique. But since then, an insurgency in Mozambique has spread despite Pretoria's protestations that it is no longer supporting rebels seeking to overthrow President Samora M. Machel.

Also, there has been no apparent easing of South Africa's support for the rebellious National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, led by Jonas Savimbi, which is battling the Luanda Government of President José Eduardo dos Santos.