



On September 10, 1979, 30 years ago, the noble heart of Antonio Agostinho Neto ceased beating. We received the news from a tearful Kundy Paihama, who was leading the Angolan delegation to the 6th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, which had concluded in Havana the previous day. Fidel, Raúl, Almeida, and President Samora Machel of Mozambique who, at that moment, was talking with us about the historic event, were filled with profound dismay.

Seven days later, on September 17, Neto would have turned 57 years old. His was a life of passion, heroism, and intelligence dedicated to the liberation of his country from colonial oppression and the building of a just society for all Angolans, which would also be a bulwark of solidarity for the sister nations who were victims of the shameful apartheid regime — Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa.

Antonio Agostinho Neto was an independence fighter, a poet, doctor, guerrilla and statesman, in that order.

For a young man in a colonialized African country, where the overwhelming majority of the people were illiterate, it was difficult to have access to secondary education. Neto, the son of a Protestant pastor father and a teacher mother, was able to finish secondary school and went to work in Luanda as a health services assistant. His dream was to be a doctor.

During those years, he began to stand out as a figure in the cultural movement that grew swiftly in the 1940s under the motto of "Let's learn about Angola."

For several years he saved up his money, and at the age of 25, in 1947, left for Portugal and enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine of the ancient University of Coimbra.

A scholarship from the U.S. Methodist Church for the pastor's son helped Neto, after his second year of living in Portugal, to survive in the metropolis and maintain his dream of becoming a doctor.

But other, even stronger dreams illuminated Agostinho's life: the independence of his homeland and saving the world from another world war.

After becoming involved in political activity, he was imprisoned for the first time, for three months, after being arrested in 1952 collecting signatures supporting the Stockholm Appeal for World Peace. To advocate world peace was a crime under the Portuguese fascist colonial regime, with its close ties to the United States and Britain, which were on a new crusade against the USSR and the popular democracies of Europe and Asia.

That first time in prison did not defeat Neto. He helped create institutions to bring together people living in Portugal who were from its colonies: the African Maritime Club, the Portuguese House of Africa, the Center for African Studies. It was during that time that he became friends with Amílcar Cabral, an agronomy student, as well as Lucio Lara, Marcelino dos Santos and Mario Andrade.

Neto's ideas went beyond the independence movement: he joined the Portuguese Communist Party.

Solidarity with the Assault on the Moncada Garrison

The 4th World Festival of Youth and Students for Peace and Friendship took place in Bucharest, Romania, from late July to early August of 1953, and there I had the privilege of being the first Cuban to meet Agostinho Neto. I was 23 years old and he was 30.

An outstanding medical student, he had traveled secretly to Romania to represent the Portuguese colonies as part of the Portuguese delegation. But instead of staying with the European delegates, he preferred to be with the Latin Americans, specifically the Brazilians, and somebody had told him that I could facilitate his transfer from one area to the other.

Neto was the first Angolan I had come across in my life. All I knew about his country was its name, and that it was a Portuguese colony in Africa. He knew more about Cuba. He remembered the poetry of Nicolás Guillén, whom I admired as the highest voice of black poetry in the world.

Marcelino dos Santos, who with Modlane and Samora Machel founded the Liberation Front of Mozambique — FRELIMO — was also part of the delegation of democratic youth from Portugal and its colonies.

Neto talked to me about the Angolan people's desires for liberation. I talked to him about our struggles, about the assault on the Moncada Garrison, which had taken place a few days earlier, at a point when we still didn't know the fate of the leader of that heroic action, Fidel

Castro, or of his brother Raúl, who was one of the signatories to the call for the World Festival in which we were taking part. We asked all of the national delegations to join in the campaign initiated by the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY): "Save the lives of Fidel Castro and his comrades!"

I ran into Neto again in Vienna in December 1954. I had left Guatemala after many months in that Central American nation. After the imperialist coup against the democratic government of President Jacobo Arbenz, and having fought in the underground against Castillo Armas, the vicious leader imposed by the United States, I managed to leave the country in September and rejoined the WFDY in Europe.

The WFDY was preparing an International Conference of Rural Youth. Agostinho Neto attended that event in late 1954.

A few weeks later, on February 9, 1955, Neto was arrested by the fearsome PIDE, the Portuguese political police. It was a cruel incarceration of more than two years. Neto had already published his first collection of poetry.

Internationally-known intellectuals spoke out for the freedom of the anti-colonialist and anti-fascist fighter: Jean Paul Sartre, André Mauriac, Aragón, Simone de Beauvoir, Nicolás Guillén, Diego Rivera, and others.

In 1957, Amnesty International declared him "political prisoner of the year."

The regime felt obliged to mount a legal farce. The court that tried him sentenced him to 18 months in prison, even though he already had been behind bars for 28 months and three days.

In October 1958, at the University of Lisbon, he finished his medical studies and married María Eugenia, his companion until death and mother of his three children.

After working as a gynecologist in a Lisbon hospital for a short time, he returned to Angola in 1959, where he worked as a doctor among the poor, particularly women, and at the same time assumed the leadership of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), founded in Luanda in 1956.

In June 1960, he was jailed for the third time. The local PIDE (secret police) chief personally arrested him in his Luanda medical office. Sent to prison in Lisbon, he was later confined to the island of São Antón, and then Santiago Island, both part of the Cape Verde archipelago. He continued practicing medicine among the people of Cape Verde and his comrades, patriots from various Portuguese colonies who were exiled there.

Once again, a campaign was built to free Agostinho Neto, honorary president of the MPLA, and the Portuguese authorities were forced to release him in 1962, ordering him to live in Portugal.

The MPLA and the Portuguese anti-fascists devised an escape plan. Neto left Portugal with his wife and small children, and after a hazardous journey, arrived in the capital of Congo Leopoldville (present-day Kinshasa), where the MPLA then had its headquarters outside of Angola.

In December of that year, Neto was elected MPLA president at the organization's national conference.

In 1963, the MPLA headquarters was transferred from Kinshasa, where the government had become a yanki-Belgian instrument, to Brazzaville, capital of the former French Congo, where a progressive government was in power, presided over by Massemba Debat.

In late August 1965, eleven years after we saw each other in Vienna, I met up with Agostinho Neto again, this time in Africa, in the Congo.

Earlier that year, in January, at the MPLA headquarters in Brazzaville, Neto had received Comandante Ernesto Che Guevara, who was on a tour of Africa. One hundred days later, Che returned to Africa, this time as commander of Column One, to join up with Lumumba's forces in the eastern region of the former Belgian Congo.

Neto's request to Che for six Cuban instructors to train and fight with the MPLA guerrilla forces on the Cabinda Front was met in May, when Captain Rafael Moracén and five other compañeros traveled from Havana and joined the Angolan combatants.

I arrived in Brazzaville and immediately went to see him at the MPLA headquarters. I was no longer talking as an organizer of festivals and international congresses, but as chief of Cuba's internationalist mission, the Patricio Lumumba Battalion, Che's Second Front in the Congo Basin, and it was with an illustrious interlocutor, the president of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola.

The main point on my agenda was Cabinda, where the six Cuban instructors were carrying out their work. We exchanged opinions on the subject, but I soon realized that his central concern was not focused on Cabinda.

"Nambuagongo," he said, pausing and then, more forcefully, repeated the word, which has the sonority of an African drum. On a large map of Angola covering one square meter of the wall, he showed me the Dembos mountain range. Nambuagongo, relatively close to Luanda. He was deeply distressed over the fate of combatants in that first political/military region, who were facing many thousands of colonial soldiers.

Portugal had bombarded the area with defoliant, the same chemical the yankis later used in Vietnam.

Neto was obsessed with sending reinforcements to the First Front. Later, he talked to me about the possibility of opening a Third Front in eastern Angola, for which collaboration was being negotiated with newly-independent Zambia. I understood his strategic idea, and that the Cabinda Front was principally a polygon with a real enemy for training cadres via the guerrilla life and small-scale combat.

The idea of training and sending columns to the First Region became stronger after Operation Macaco in Cabinda, implemented in late December by joint Angolan/Cuban forces that did not achieve their specific goal of attacking a Portuguese garrison, but which turned out to be a grand rehearsal by a unit of more than 100 men operating as such.

The conversation in Havana between Fidel and Neto, accompanied by Hoyi Ya Henda, during the Tricontinental Conference in January 1966 revolved precisely around our collaboration in

these strategic ideas.

In mid-July, a column of 100 combatants was ready to reinforce the First Region. It was Neto's decision that that elite unit, called upon to execute such a difficult mission, should bear the name of our hero Camilo Cienfuegos.

The column honored his glorious name. It secretly entered Congo Leopoldville. It formed as an armed column on that country's border with Angola, and after a 35-day march, evading the enemy, reached the First Region. It was the first time I remember seeing Neto laugh. His smile, with his large teeth, lit up his face months later when he received the news of the Cienfuegos squad and its successful march.

Two new columns, the Kamy and the Ferraz Bomboko, took off for the same destination, the interior of Angola, although with different fates. We are not going to tell the whole story, but both contributed to taking forward the struggle in Angola's interior, in the north and in the east. Two and a half years after our first meeting in Brazzaville, Neto's strategic ideas were becoming a reality.

For years, I preserved the memory of seeing Neto with that victorious smile. We would meet again in Luanda, nine years later, in early December of 1975.

I had the privilege of collaborating closely in Angola with President Neto for three and a half years. The more I dealt with him, the more I admired his position of principles, his revolutionary ideas, and his unshakeable identification with the cause of justice, freedom and socialism. On May 1, 1979, I returned from my long residence in Angola as representative of the leadership of our Party and chief of our civilian mission.

Four and a half months later, we suffered his loss.

His poetry speaks of the need to battle, to dream, to fight for independence, and the need to fight for a new Angola, to re-conquer the Angolan identity despite the presence of the colonizers.

Allow me to offer this vivid biographical portrait of Agostinho Neto, in remarks made in his presence by Fidel, during the 26th of July rally of 1976 in the city of Pinar del Río:

"And we have here a man who also devoted his whole life to the effort of liberating his homeland, who was forced to confront enormous difficulties. In order to make the two situations more similar, Neto is also a man of extraordinary culture, of great intellectual capacity and an extraordinary poet, who devoted his life and his pen to his people, to his brothers and sisters, discriminated against and enslaved, to forging the political consciousness of the Angolans.

"And like Martí, he wrote many of his best works and his best poems in the suffering of imprisonment, of exile and of the enslavement of his brothers and sisters. Martí and Neto have been forgers of the homeland.

"Not only did he forge a consciousness, he also forged, like Martí, the instrument of the struggle and charted a line, a road — the only road in Angola, like yesterday in Cuba — for achieving independence, which was the heroic struggle of the people, the armed struggle of the people.

And for many years, he has led that struggle. Neto is also one of the most modest, noble and honest men I have ever known."

I would like to end my evocation of the beloved figure of Agostinho Neto by reaffirming what General of the Army Raúl Castro stated in Luanda, in February of this year, at the start of official talks with President José Eduardo dos Santos of the Republic of Angola:

"The historic fraternity between Cuba and Angola is indestructible. It was forged in our common struggle against colonialism and apartheid, under the guidance of two exceptional men: Agostinho Neto and Fidel Castro."

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