

Jorge Risquet, Cuban Revolutionary Leader in African Affairs, Dies 40 Years After Angolan Campaign

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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A leading figure in the formation of the Communist Party of Cuba and numerous heroic efforts on the African continent, Jorge Risquet Valdes-Saldana passed away on September 28 at the age of 85.

Risquet was born on May 6, 1930, and later joined the revolutionary youth movement in 1943. He was Cuba's Representative and Head for Latin America in the World Federation of Democratic Youth and carried out an internationalist mission in Guatemala in 1954.

During the United States supported Fulgencio Batista dictatorship he was kidnapped, tortured and incarcerated. He joined the Revolutionary Army in 1958 in the 2nd Frank País Eastern Front.

After the triumph of the Revolution, he held the positions of Head of the Political Department and Head of Operations of the Army in the former Oriente province; Organization Secretary of the Provincial Committee of the United Party of the Socialist Revolution of Cuba in that province; head of the "Patricio Lumumba" Internationalist Battalion in Congo Brazzaville; Minister of Labor; and Head of the Cuban Civil Internationalist Mission in the People's Republic of Angola between 1975 and 1979.

From the earliest days of the Cuban Revolution the country expressed concrete solidarity with the African Liberation Movement. Racism was outlawed in Cuba and its internationalist outlook permeated the foreign policy of the state.

In October 1960, when the then Cuban Premier Fidel Castro Ruz visited the United Nations General Assembly in New York, the revolutionary leader set up his residence at the Theresa Hotel in Harlem. Castro met with Malcolm X, a leading figure in the Nation of Islam, along with participating in a banquet with African American workers at the famous hotel.

After the imperialist undermined the national independence struggle in the former Belgian Congo, Che Guevara in an eloquent speech before the UN denounced the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the founder of the Congolese National Movement (Lumumba) and placed the guilt for this crime squarely on imperialism. Guevara would lead a delegation of Cuban internationalists in 1965 to Congo in an attempt to reverse the course of the counter-revolution.

Cuban Role in the Liberation of Southern Africa

Even though the Congo campaign was not successful in defeating the counter-revolution in that mineral-rich country in 1965, a decade later the Cuban government would respond to a request by Agostino Neto, the leader of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) to assist the independence movement in defeating an invasion by the South African Defense Forces (SADF) and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) aimed at installing a puppet western-backed regime in Luanda. Between November 1975 and early 1976, some 55,000 Cuban internationalist troops were deployed which assisted the MPLA's military wing FAPLA in defeating the SADF intervention and consolidating the national independence of Angola.

Cuban military units remained in Angola for 16 years fighting alongside the FAPLA forces as well as the South West Africa People's Organization's (SWAPO) military cadres of the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) and the African National Congress (ANC) armed wing, Um Khonto We Sizwe (MK).

The U.S. and its allies in Pretoria, armed, funded and provided diplomatic cover for both Jonas Savimbi of UNITA and Holden Roberto of the FNLA based in the-then Zaire, which was renamed after the triumph of the counter-revolution in Congo-Kinshasha. UNITA proved to be the most formidable foe since it was given direct assistance by the CIA and the SADF then operating in South West Africa (Namibia) prior to its independence in 1990.

This struggle reached its climax in 1987-1988 with battles centered at Cuito Cuanavale where the SADF was routed and defeated in Angola. These battles would convince the racist regime in Pretoria and its backers within the Reagan and Bush administrations that a military defeat against the Southern African liberation movements was not possible.

A ceasefire was declared in late 1988 and firm negotiations were undertaken between the MPLA government in Angola and the apartheid regime. The U.S. and racist South Africa did not want the Cuban government involved in the talks aimed at the withdrawal of SADF forces from southern Angola and the independence process in Namibia.

Nonetheless, due to the overwhelming support of the-then Organization of African Unity (OAU), later renamed the African Union (AU), and progressive forces internationally, the Cubans were not only allowed into the talks but played a prominent role. The central role of Jorge Risquet in the talks enhanced his international prominence illustrating the significance of Cuba in the African revolutionary process.

Risquet led the Cuban delegation in the talks that resulted in the withdrawal of the apartheid army from southern Angola and the liberation of neighboring Namibia under settler-colonial occupation for a century. Internationally supervised elections were held in Namibia in late 1989 leading to the declaration of independence from apartheid on March 21, 1990 under the leadership of President Sam Nujoma of SWAPO, which won overwhelmingly in the elections.

The independence of Namibia and the ongoing mass and armed struggles in South Africa led by the ANC, forced the removal of P.W. Botha, the-then president of the apartheid regime, and the ascendancy of F.W. DeKlerk. The new regime began to indicate that it was willing to negotiate an end to the political crisis in South Africa.

On February 2, 1990, the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and other previously banned organizations were allowed to function openly. Nine days later, on

February 11, Nelson Mandela was released after over 27 years of imprisonment in the dungeons of the racist apartheid system.



Four years later the ANC would win a solid majority and take power in South Africa sweeping out the dreaded system of apartheid. In a matter of less than two decades between 1975 and 1994, the system of white minority rule in Southern Africa was soundly defeated with the profound assistance of revolutionary Cuba.

Risquet Spoke in Ghana at Symposium Honoring Kwame Nkrumah

In a keynote address in September 2012 in Ghana honoring the 40th anniversary of the death of Kwame Nkrumah, Risquet outlined Cuba's role in the African Revolution from the 1960s to the present period.

He stressed in his address the ancestral ties between the people of Cuba and the African continent that resulted from the Atlantic Slave Trade. He also paid tribute to the role Kwame Nkrumah, the leader of the independence movement in Ghana and its first prime minister and president for his role in the creation of the Organization in Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America (OSPAAL) formed in 1966 at the Tri-continental Congress in Havana.

Risquet said in Ghana "This was the understanding with which Cuban fighters came to ancestral Africa to fight side by side with the people against colonialism and the oppressive apartheid regime. For 26 years, 381 thousand Cuban soldiers and officers fought alongside African populations; between April 24, 1965, when Ernest Che Guevara and his men crossed Lake Tanganyika, and May 25, 1991 when the remaining 500 Cuban fighters returned home triumphant."

He went on to point out as well that "Among these internationalists were three of the Five Anti-terrorist Heroes currently held (now released) in the Imperialist's prison. 2, 400 Cuban internationalist fighters lost their lives on African soil. Today we no more send soldiers. Now, we send doctors, teachers, builders, specialists in various fields."

Tributes to Risquet were delivered by the ANC of South Africa, the MPLA of Angola and other revolutionary parties and organizations throughout the world.

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Azikiwe](#)

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