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The year 2008 will usher in the 20th anniversary of the defeat, at Cuito Canavale, Angola, of the South African Defence Force that was fighting side-by-side with Jonas Savimbi's UNITA rebels. The defeat was at the hand of a combined army of the People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA) and Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces. The armies had been engaged in deadly combat, on Angolan soil, since November 15, 1987. South Africa's defence force had invaded Angola, as it had done on a previous occasion.

Next year, maybe, we will analyse how the South African media reported that defeat, given how a previous invasion and defeat of the invading force was handled as I will show a little later.

The emphatic defeat of the apartheid force at Cuito Canavel opened the road to freedom for the people of Namibia and, subsequently, South Africa. Movement towards Namibia's independence was so swift after South Africa's Cuito Canavale defeat that by May, 1988, the Four-Party talks were underway in London. Those talks culminated in the signing in December that year, at the UN, of the South West Africa Peace Agreement

If you are asking the question - and I doubt you would do that - why I am raising apartheid South Africa's forays into parts of the African Continent on the occasion of an event that is specifically designed to look at apartheid's actions against our people, in South Africa, it is because it is imperative that we situate what happened on October 19, 1977, on the entire spectrum of the apartheid policies and the escalation that was happening further to entrench repression in the country. I also want to recall the responses to the escalation, in the main, by the forces of change in our country and beyond its borders, but particularly so on the African Continent.

Those of us here tonight who were journalists at the time, will remember the reluctance of large segments of the South African media, including what was defined as the liberal press, to report on the invasion in 1975 of Angola by the defence force. The denial of their involvement in war in Angola by the South African government was swallowed lock, stock and barrel by the media houses. In fact, one of the liberal papers at the time went on to pose the question, in defence of the apartheid government in the face of doubt by the people:

“Who will you believe: the government or the terrorists who were making the wild claims against government?”

The paper went on to say it believed government and encouraged its readers to do the same.

It was only after the defence force was driven out of Angola, on March 27, 1976, with its tail between its legs, that South Africans came to know the truth about the invasion of Angola. But, the extent of fatalities was never reported. None of the media houses boldly went out to research the matter and tell South Africa how many of her sons died in that war.

The invasion, of course, was used to consolidate the political orientation of the apartheid regime at the time. They were developing what was to be known as Total Onslaught, a concept that was designed as a propaganda tool to brainwash South Africans into believing their country was under siege from communism. In that war, government’s propaganda went on to say, no one would survive, as communism would kill all in its wake: both black and white people.

Captains of industry were terrified by the spectre of communism which claimed Angola and Mozambique and the wealth in those countries that capitalism would have continued to suck out until the countries were bare. Large parts of the media bought the propaganda, thinking about their profits and fearing the potential nationalisation, under communism, of the industry.

Government, riding the crest of the wave of support it was getting especially from the white community and its entities, said communism was not just on South Africa’s borders; its tentacles were already inside the country in the form of the struggling masses whose organisations were engaged in the revolutionary project to liberate South Africa.

Some of those organisations, 18 of them, and some of their leaders were banned. More than 70 of the leaders were arrested and detained without trial. The World and its sister paper, the Weekend World were closed down. All of those entities, including religious organisations were, according to government, furthering the aims of communism.

A large portion of the journalists working for the two papers were members of the Union of Black Journalists (UBJ) which was among the organisations that were banned.

When the UBJ met in congress at Durban during the weekend of October 7 to 9, 1977, it already was an open secret to the delegates that the apartheid government was preparing to clampdown on the union.

The UBJ was expanded and relaunched as a national entity at Johannesburg, in 1976. The Durban event in 1977, therefore, was the first congress of the union in its new form. Before that the UBJ was basically a Southern Transvaal organisation, whose membership came in the main from Johannesburg newspapers.

The union took principled positions on a number of issues regarding South Africa's social, economic and political equation. One of the most important was the decision by the UBJ to define itself into the ranks of the struggling masses of our country.

The union exhorted its members to cover the real South African story; the story of repression and the people's fight against apartheid; the story of deprivation and dehumanisation of all black people on the basis of their pigmentation; the story of the harassment of all those who did not acquiesce with their oppression. And the story of torture and death in detention; the story of the kidnapping and killing of activists.

The position the UBJ had taken, the union members understood, was going to pit them directly against the apartheid state. They knew, also, that for their stories to see the light of day, they had to struggle against the news editors who were white and living in fear of the advancing communist ogre.

Having placed themselves in the trenches of the revolution, the members of the UBJ accepted that the reaction of the apartheid state would be fast and furious against them. But, they possessed volumes of courage and were prepared to face the onslaught from the state's security organs.

Our president, Joe Thloloe, was arrested shortly after the UBJ's council meeting, at East London, at the beginning of 1977 but, every UBJ activity thereafter was always pervaded by his indomitable revolutionary spirit.

The struggle in the newsrooms was a kettle of a different colour. We had to be strategic. UBJ instructed its members to do the following to prevent the news editors from willy-nilly spiking their stories:

Research the story properly, covering all angles and getting comments from all role players;

Present the stories in the best form possible, paying particular attention to the credibility of the content, and

Use language that would be the best medium in the circumstances properly to communicate with the readers.

The clampdown on October 19, although flabbergasting and deserving of the condemnation it received at home and abroad, had been preceded by a more horrifying incident when, on September 12, the state's security forces killed one of South Africa's beloved sons, Steve Biko. By that time, the apartheid state was escalating its repression, using arrests, detention without trial, torture and assassination, to force the struggling masses into submission. But, the struggle for freedom continued unabated.

Because we were anticipating action against the UBJ, we put in place a structure that would take over immediately when the banning order was served. It formed the nucleus of what emerged publicly as the Writers Association of South Africa (WASA). In 1980 we expanded WASA into the Media Workers Association of South Africa (Mwasa), to include all black media workers at the various components of the media houses.

The more the signs were becoming much clearer that the apartheid regime was being choked by an international community that was becoming more hostile, the more the regime further escalated repression, sending its army and the police into the townships to try to quell the fire of revolution that had been lit across the country. But, the youth, at school and outside school raised their level of activism. The workers, mobilised in unions, became more militant. The new situation allowed the people's organisations that were banned in 1960 to root themselves among the people to build their underground structures.

The UBJ, fighting as it did from the revolutionary trenches of our people, was also fighting for the freedom of the media as a key component of democracy. Today, that freedom is recognised in the country's Constitution where the Bill of Rights recognises freedom of religion, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media, and freedom to receive or impart information or ideas.

Upward mobility is part of the social construct that defines human interaction and endeavour. It stands to reason, therefore, that some of the journalists who were members of the UBJ would leave the media

and pursue other fulfilling careers, while others would become senior managers and executives in the media. I followed fulltime a political path and subsequently became a minister.

I hope, though, that wherever those journalists are, they have not lost the teachings of the Union of Black Journalists, especially diligence and honesty in the collection and imparting of information. UBJ's principle on the proper writing of stories was not time bound. It should still apply today and should be the lodestar of all practising journalists.

We must be truthful, though, and admit that there is a lot of carelessness these days in the way that stories are handled and there have been examples of sloppy journalism that passes as information to the public.

In the early period of his presidency, especially in 2000, President Thabo Mbeki became a target of criticism, led mostly by the media. Many angles and arguments were used to back up the criticism. One element of the criticism that was sustained over time, was that he was anti-democratic. Two elements of the anti-democratic tendency, the media and members of the parliamentary opposition argued, were that:

He was undermining Parliament by his regular absence from the House, and that

He was so undemocratic that he had shifted his office, without consultation with anyone, from Cape Town to Pretoria.

At the time, I was the president's Parliamentary Counsellor. I responded to two newspapers that had even run editorials on the matter, the East London Daily Dispatch and the Mail and Guardian. Both papers did not publish my letter. In fairness to them, I may have been a bit arrogant in my response and, perhaps, my piece deserved to be ignored.

My point of departure was:

I was surprised that there were journalists in South Africa, especially editors, who did not know that the South African president, in terms of the present Constitution, is not a member of parliament. That stipulation is carried in Chapter 5, Section 87, where it is indicated: "When elected President, a person ceases to be a member of the National Assembly and, within five days must assume office by swearing or affirming faithfulness to the Republic and obedience to the Constitution..."

My view was that anyone who writes about parliamentary processes must know the rules and regulations that relate to those processes. But, the same ignorance was displayed by the media going to the 2004 general election. There was some speculation that the president would appoint Kgalema Motlanthe as the country's deputy president.

Kgalema was not on the list of those who would be parliamentarians. And the Constitution says: "The President must select the Deputy President from among the members of the National Assembly."

Equally surprising to me was the alleged shift of the president's office from Cape Town to Pretoria. But, since 1910, South Africa has been governed from Pretoria. Over the years journalists have referred to the South African government as either Pretoria or the Pretoria government. Reports of the shifting of the president's office from Cape Town to Pretoria, as an anti-democratic tendency, was to me very odd, but even weird when editorials appeared on the matter. My response to that allegation was that, early on in our education we were taught, in a subject called Civics, that South Africa had three capitals. The legislative capital was Cape Town; Pretoria was the administrative capital, while Bloemfontein was the judicial capital.

Pretoria continues to be the administrative capital. The president, of course, has an office in Cape Town, at Tuynhuys. He uses that office when parliament is in session because Cabinet and Cabinet committees sit in Cape Town during that period.

One of the tasks I found on my table when I assumed duty in the Ministry for Safety and Security was an enquiry relating to farm attacks. There were a number of questions from the parliamentary opposition that I had to field on the matter.

Out of the blue, one newspaper ran a report and an editorial claiming that the enquiry had been completed and the relevant report had been handed over to me. I was not publishing it because it was such an indictment against government that I was busy doctoring it. No sources were mentioned to back up the story. I approached the newspaper, among other things to ask if they had spoken to the person who was heading the enquiry. They had not.

Recently, the country's newspapers led the attack on the president and government on the Judge Moseneke recommendations on the salaries of the president and the executive. It was one of the most virulent attacks on the president and the executive. But, none of the newspapers, from the editors to the reporters, had checked whether the president had accepted the Moseneke recommendations.

There are other examples I could mention but, it is not my intention to do that at the moment. There may be other opportunities in the future that will create space for us to interrogate the matter more exhaustively. I do want to say, though, that what I have already indicated and other examples in future,

shows how much there has been a gravitation away from the principles of journalism of checking out stories and sources and reporting both sides of the matter. Not being in the industry, I don't know why journalists act as they do sometimes.

I worked for the East London Daily Dispatch at some point in my journalistic life. Around the walls of that paper's newsroom there were banners that screamed down at the reporters in the newsroom: "Don't chance it; check it!"

How I wish that was the slogan of all journalists today in honour of such giants of the industry in the past like Henry Nxumalo; Nat Nakasa; Can Themba; Ruth First of Fighting Talk, the Guardian, New Age, Spark; Zeke Mphahlele, Casey Motsisi, and Juby Mayet, just to mention a few of those luminaries.

Journalists have a responsibility robustly to interrogate the information they get so that when it is placed before the public it is a truthful account in every respect. Journalists must be penetrative in their search for stories and must record the result of their research without fear or favour. But, they must be driven all the time by a desire to get at the truth and not be sidetracked by the need for quick wins that often slip into falsity. Debate that is sparked by the media as they record the South African story must be factual and not fallacious. The springboard for developing the country must be the truth.