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MANDELA MEETS WITH ANGOLAN REBEL LEADER SAVIMBI IN PEACE EFFORT

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UMTATA, SOUTH AFRICA UMTATA, South Africa (AP) _ President Nelson Mandela met Tuesday with Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi to help seal an end to a 20-year war in Angola that has killed 500,000 people.

With the date for the installation of an Angolan government of reconciliation fast approaching, Savimbi's role remains uncertain.

Savimbi, who has rejected a government offer of one of two vice president's posts, refused to tell reporters Tuesday what position he would accept, or whether his security concerns have been resolved.

However, he said the talks with Mandela were ``fruitful and very open." Details were to be released Wednesday in a communique.

An Angolan government of reconciliation is to be named Jan. 23 and sworn in two days later. Finding a role for Savimbi that is acceptable to all parties is crucial _ a 1991 peace accord unraveled when Savimbi lost a presidential election and returned with his UNITA troops to the battlefield.

UNITA, an acronym for the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, wants special status for Savimbi as leader of the opposition.

About 70,000 UNITA combatants have disarmed under U.N.-sponsored peace accords and UNITA commanders already have begun to merge with their former foes to form a new national army.

Mandela has been advising Savimbi and Angolan President Jose Eduardo Dos Santos behind the scenes on how to form a reconciliation government after years of bitter antagonism. They sought Mandela for his experience in forming his own reconciliation government in 1994 after the end of oppressive white rule in South Africa, Mandela's spokesman, Parks Mankahlana, said Tuesday.

Mandela's participation is a reflection of his effort to take a bigger part in crisis-solving in Africa, despite backing away from such a role a year ago.

Mandela, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his leadership in ending apartheid, does not want to be considered the elder statesman of Africa, Mankahlana said.

Under its former white leadership, South Africa was heavy-handed with neighboring countries, sometimes destabilizing them to suit its own purposes. Given that history and South Africa's economic dominance in the region, Mandela is wary of fueling suspicions his government wants to play a ``big brother" role, Mankahlana said.

Nevertheless, Mandela has been organizing a summit of African leaders to end conflicts in Zaire and Rwanda, and recently tried to negotiate an end to a political leadership dispute in Zambia. In addition, Mandela further raised his international profile last year by becoming chairman of the Southern African Development Community, a 12-nation bloc.