

# BBC programme depicts catastrophic conditions since war resumed in Angola

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On Tuesday, July 6 the BBC "File On 4" radio programme presented a report by Jenny Cuffe that documented the deteriorating situation in Angola. The programme painted a graphic portrait of the enormous social and economic catastrophe facing ordinary working people there.

The renewed war between the government and UNITA, which began again in December 1998, has led to 1.75 million refugees facing hardship and starvation. These new refugees are in addition to those from previous conflicts. United Nations General Secretary Kofi Annan has said that unless money is made available, hundreds of thousands could die. The Angolan Minister of Social Affairs and Humanitarian Aid, Albino Malungo, spelt out some of the dire statistics: 3 million Angolans in extreme need; 100,000 children orphaned or in extreme circumstances.

The programme's presenter went to Kuito, a hill town in the Angolan highlands, where she spoke to a 14-year-old boy who had been driven from his village when it was attacked by UNITA forces. They had killed his mother and father. He escaped with his grandmother and other family members by walking 40 miles to Kuito, which is surrounded by land mines and UNITA heavy artillery. Some 66,000 refugees live in straw huts in the town. UNITA has a policy of terrorising people to drive them from their land and villages, so that they must become refugees in towns like Kuito.

The hill town has been under siege by UNITA forces since March this year. Supplies only arrive by air, and even then the planes have to land by spiralling down to avoid attack from UNITA missiles. The UN has appealed for \$100 million to feed the people of Angola, but only half of the money has been forthcoming. Children have to walk many miles to get to Kuito. When they arrive, they are often emaciated or bloated

through starvation, and many do not survive the first 24 hours at the feeding stations. Food has to be given to the most needy: the children, elderly and nursing mothers. For others, there is none. Aqmed Mohammed, the director of Care International, said that tens of thousands in the town are not receiving food, and the worst-case scenario would be to see many thousands dying on the streets.

In Lusaka, Zambia, in November 1994, a peace deal was signed between Angolan President Jose Eduardo dos Santos and Jonas Savimbi, the UNITA leader. The accord was to be monitored by the United Nations. Seven thousand UN troops were sent to supervise an area twice the size of France. Apart from monitoring the cease-fire, the UN mandate was to impose sanctions to prevent UNITA from rearming and to establish a human rights division to deter violations by both sides. The deal collapsed when Savimbi turned down the offer to become joint vice president and refused to recognise the elected MPLA government. UNITA recommenced its attacks on the civilian population and government targets at the end of last year. The UN mission left Angola this past June.

Patrick Smith of the political newsletter *Africa Confidential* explained how the UN had failed in its task of monitoring the peace. He said it was common knowledge that UNITA continued to store weapons, sent troops to Morocco for training, and imported arms from Zambia. Savimbi was thus able to restart the war, better armed than when he had agreed to the cease-fire in 1994. The chief of staff of the UN Angolan contingency conceded that his troops had been unable to prevent UNITA forces rearming.

The MPLA government troops will begin shortly an offensive against UNITA, before the end of the dry season. In the past, UNITA relied on money and aid

from the apartheid regime in South Africa and the CIA; today it has access to enormous wealth through its control of Angolan diamond mines. Diamonds are smuggled to Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and from there to Belgium. Smith explained that UNITA has had control of these diamond fields for the last 10 years, which has earned it about \$200-300 million a year. He said they are the “best financed rebel organisation in the world”. Only now has the United Nations promised to act to block this source of finance to UNITA, and has set up a high-level commission to find ways of preventing this lucrative trade. It imposed an embargo on the diamond trade last year. UNITA has used the enormous amount of money raised to buy arms in Eastern Europe, which are smuggled in through Zambia. The programme added that some MPLA government ministers and generals have colluded with the illegal diamond smuggling operation, to line their own pockets.

To finance its side of the war, the Angolan government has used its vast crude oil resources. It has obtained a \$575 million loan from international companies to finance its military spending. Smith explained that although technically the country is bankrupt; it has mortgaged its future oil resource earnings for the next two to three years to continue the war. He explained that this year alone, the oil companies will provide billions through so-called “signature bonuses” to the government. Without this the war could not be financed.

Angola is potentially one of the richest countries in Africa with vast oil and diamond reserves. It also has good agricultural land and fisheries, and was once a major exporter of coffee. However, the years of war and conflict have reduced it to enormous poverty.

The BBC programme presented some of the chilling statistics: Thirty percent of children die before their fifth birthday, half the population does not have access to drinking water and 82 percent of the population live in poverty. The World Bank, concerned over the imbalance in the economy and the disproportionate spending on defence, has frozen Angolan investments. It has promised to review this in September 1999. For its part, the government has promised economic reforms and to move towards a market economy. Social Affairs Minister Albino Malungo explained his department received only 1 percent of the national

budget, the bulk going to the Ministry of Defence.

Most Angolans just want an end to the war, but many critics are afraid to speak out, fearing reprisals. The programme interviewed Raphael Markesh, who is part of a group campaigning to end the war. He says the government tells the people they must endure any privations to win the war, and that until it is won, there can be no social reforms. His opposition to the war has brought him into conflict with the government and he faces unspecified charges of offences against the state.

Raphael explained how a minority was benefiting from the situation. There is widespread corruption; government officials siphon off money to finance their lavish lifestyles; and businessmen with government connections pay no taxes. The police stop motorists in the street and demand “refreshments”, payments of money handed over when the police inspect the driving licence.

Smith confirmed this corruption. He explained that, in spite of huge sums going to the military budget, the condition of the troops was poor, with many lacking proper boots and other essential equipment, which shows that money is being diverted. The air force has 100 planes, but only 6 are operational. Corruption has become an integral component of the war economy.

According to a US State Department report, human rights abuses by both sides have increased since the conflict restarted. Although a signatory to the Ottawa convention outlawing the laying of new land mines, Angola is contravening this by continuing to lay mines. Eighty thousand children were injured in land mine incidents last year. The programme explained that the Angolan government is also responsible for beatings, tortures and disappearances. Alex Vine, of Human Rights Watch, said people are scared to talk out about what is happening. He explained that if someone upsets a senior government official, they could lose their job, suffer harassment, or even disappear. Vine said that in the UNITA-controlled zones it was even worse, “The only right you have is to live as long as you keep your mouth shut.”



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