

Angola: from cease fire to famine

Barry Mason
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Following the killing of UNITA leader Joseph Savimbi, a Western-backed ceasefire in April halted the 27-year civil war between the government and the rebel UNITA forces. Aid agencies now have to deal with severe malnutrition and disease resulting from the effects of the war in vast areas of the country that were previously inaccessible.

It seems that neither the Angolan government nor the Western powers, who were aware of the war's impact on the country's agriculture, made serious preparations to deal with the crisis.

Dr. Morten Rostrup, president of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF—Doctors without Borders), one of the main aid agencies working in Angola, said, "I am appalled to witness the outright disregard for such a desperate situation. The world is knowingly allowing Angolans to die of starvation, their number already totaling in the thousands."

He continued: "It is shocking to witness the needs and yet see that food distribution in the newly accessible areas of the country is erratic and in many places completely absent. If the Angolan authorities, the United Nations agencies and especially the WFP [United Nations World Food Program], as well as the donor and diplomatic community, do not immediately pull together to increase assistance programmes, hundreds of thousands are at risk of dying of starvation or disease."

The WFP recently stated that one million people in Angola need urgent assistance as they are at risk of starvation. It expects to be feeding 1.5 million people by the end of the year. Other reports state that as many as three million people require immediate aid.

The situation facing children is especially serious. One aid worker from the Christian Children's Fund described the conditions: "We are seeing incredible malnutrition among children, no education for children, no immunizations.... It's as if these folks have been

living their lives in another century, removed from everything that is our reality for the past decade."

MSF's report explains that whilst it has set up 44 feeding centres in ten out of 18 of the provinces of Angola, it faces severe difficulties in entering the areas that are now accessible. "Prior to the peace accord, travel was only possible by air—and that was severely restricted. Although road transport is now an option, many of the roads are in severe states of disrepair, have been mined, or bridges have been destroyed making road access to many provinces impossible."

During the war up to four million people, about a third of the population, were displaced. Some fled to neighboring countries, but many were internally displaced, surviving as best as they could in the bush. Both the government and UNITA carried out a scorched earth policy, driving people off the land and not allowing them to resettle as subsistence farmers. Since the ceasefire many of these displaced people are now coming out of the bush and turning up at feeding centres.

The Angolan government set up quartering centres, expecting 55,000 UNITA troops to give themselves up. Troops and their families, in return for giving up their arms, would receive food and medical aid. The government claims to have been overwhelmed, as around 84,000 troops have given themselves up, accompanied by around 250,000 family members. Officials admit that up to 5,000 UNITA troops and an unknown number of women and children have died in the camps from hunger and disease due to the lack of provision. There are fears that military conflict could restart, as 6,000 UNITA troops have recently been reported leaving the camps in search of food. A BBC report of June 21 refers to UNITA soldiers taking their weapons and returning to the bush, using violence or the threat of violence to get food.

Whilst the UN has defended itself against its critics, it

is clear that the charges that Western governments are deliberately ignoring the catastrophe are true. The UN's humanitarian coordinator in Angola, Erik De Mul, said that the international community had "not yet fully responded" to UN requests for funding. "This is the real issue. The UN does not have, at present, sufficient resources to launch programmes, including general food distributions, to meet all of the needs. We are forced to target the most vulnerable and even then, we are not able to reach everyone in critical distress."

Unlike the other governments of Southern Africa, particularly the Zimbabwean regime of President Robert Mugabe, there have been no attacks from Western politicians on the well-known corruption of the Angolan elite and their persistent refusal to use wealth from oil earnings to alleviate poverty and starvation in the country.

One recent investigation carried out by Global Witness, "All the President's Men", showed the close links between the Bush administration and the Angola regime. In particular the French businessman Pierre Falcone, jailed in France for his part in the Angolagate scandal—the arms for oil deals in which millions of dollars of arms were sold to Angola in breach of UN sanctions—was shown to have donated to Bush's election campaign and Falcone's wife to be a friend of First Lady Laura Bush.

Relief agencies claim that food shortages at the UNITA camps are the result of high-level corruption within the government. *Africa Confidential* reports that responsibility for supplying food to the UNITA soldiers in the camps has been granted to a company called Entresposto Commercial, which won a \$50 million contract. The main figure in the company is General Helder Vieira Dias Kopelipa, who is head of the presidency's military office and has close contacts with the President's daughter, Isabel dos Santos, as well as with Pierre Falcone.

Kopelipa bought food in Brazil to supply to the UNITA troops. He has refused to allow the UN officials access to the camps. While some food arrived from Brazil in mid-May, there is no indication how much of the \$50 million has actually been spent on food or why it should be imported from Brazil.

If more aid does start to flow into Angola, it will be because of fears that a resurgence of war would be damaging to oil and diamond exports to the West.

Commenting on the news that UNITA soldiers were returning to the bush, a political analyst from the London based International Institute for Strategic Studies warned of the potential danger to US strategic interests:

"Angola is clearly an important source of oil for the United States because of possible instability in Venezuela and doubts about reserves in North America."

Angola already supplies more oil to the US than does Kuwait.

The Angolan government's treatment of its population is highlighted in a recently released study carried out jointly by the UN children's agency (UNICEF) and the Angolan National Institute for Statistics—the first nationwide survey to be carried out since 1996. It paints a devastating picture resulting from government social spending that is far lower than every other country in Africa.

Half of all rural children and 40 percent of urban children don't attend school. Only three out of 10 women over the age of 15 in rural areas and six out of ten in urban areas can read or write. 30 percent of children suffer from malnutrition and the child mortality rate is the third worst in the world.

IMF figures for recent years show that whilst government expenditure on the armed forces and police reached as high as 40 percent of the total, spending on the entire social sector (health, education, housing, social security and welfare) has dropped from 15 percent in 1994 to 9.4 percent.



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