

Documentary focuses on struggle to control Angola's oil

Barry Mason
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Britain's Channel 4 recently broadcast a programme entitled "America's New Frontier" as part of its Unreported World series. The documentary focused on the social and political situation in Angola. Along with other Western African countries, Angola is becoming increasingly important as a source of oil for the United States.

Reporter Sam Killey described Angola as "one of the most strategic frontiers in the American empire." He explained that in the light of the unstable political situation in the Middle East, Angola and other West African countries were becoming a focus of America's oil strategy.

The civil war that raged for decades following the pullout of the Portuguese in 1975 was fuelled by American and South African support for the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) faction, formerly led by Jonas Savimbi. The civil war came to an end two years ago. As part of its realignment of foreign policy following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US withdrew support from UNITA and backed the regime of Jose Eduardo dos Santos.

Killey explained how US oil companies are now pouring huge amounts of money into Angola, spurred on by rising oil prices. The benefits of this money are confined to a very small minority.

He met with children living on the streets in the centre of Luanda, Angola's capital. One group of around 50 was living in an abandoned building in absolute squalor. Most looked about 13-years-old and were orphans or runaways. They sniffed petrol to blunt the reality of their existence.

Eduardo, an 11-year-old, asked the reporting team for help to escape his situation explaining that he was surviving by eating rubbish. Others explained how they were at the mercy of the police, who round them up, beat them and—they alleged—sometimes kill street children. Whilst Killey was filming, the police turned up to find out what was happening.

After the police had gone some of the children took the reporter to a channel with an open sewer running through it. They explained how they would harvest the tomatoes that grow from the human excrement. Where the channel passes

under buildings, the children sling hammocks from the roof where they sleep at night. In the rainy season the water flowing beneath them is three feet deep and they are unable to leave their hammocks for days until the level subsides.

One in four children in Angola die before their fifth birthday. Luanda alone had 5,000 street children and an unknown number in the rest of the country.

In contrast to the obscene poverty in which the children lived, Killey filmed an exclusive supermarket where to shop you have to produce a membership card. The imported goods on offer included pate foie gras.

The Angolan elite takes a cut in the wealth that comes from the exploitation of the country's oil reserves. Dos Santos has been in power for 25 years and the programme showed one of two of his recently built palaces.

The flagrant flaunting of wealth amidst the dire poverty of the mass of the population is helping fuel social and political opposition. The regime responds with savage brutality. Killey met with a group of young men who recounted how one of their friends was pulled up by the police after they heard him singing the lyrics of one of Angola's popular rap artists MCK. The song is critical of the government, contrasting the lavish lifestyle of the elite with the stark deprivation of the majority.

The police beat the young man, tied his elbows behind his back and forced him at gun point to walk out into the sea. Unable to swim, he drowned and his body was washed up the next day. Killey met with his young widow and her two sons who explained that the police had threatened her after opposition politicians had offered her help. There was an official inquiry into the killing, but it has not resulted in any prosecutions.

According to a Human Rights Watch spokesperson, \$4.27 billion "went missing" between 1997 and 2002, around nine percent of GDP each year. He attributed this loss mainly to gross mismanagement and corruption.

Killey went to the town of Cuito in the eastern part of Angola, which he had previously visited 11 years ago in the midst of the civil war. It still bore the same war-ravaged

appearance. The only rebuilding seemed to be of the regional assembly building and the governor's palace.

Whilst in Cuito he attended a concert by MCK, whose songs tap into the enormous anger felt by the youth and young adults. Fifty percent of the population are under 30 and believe the government is ripping them off.

To fly to Cuito requires a five-hour cross-country journey to the airport. Footage of that journey showed abandoned fields and no livestock, most of which were killed during the civil war. On the road he met a de-mining team looking for the thousands of landmines sown in the course of the civil war. According to Killey, no road in Angola is totally clear of mines. Those buried many years ago can work their way to the surface as the result of pressure from traffic or road works.

The Angolan oilfields lie mainly offshore around Cabinda, an enclave at the northern tip of Angola. Cabinda is separated from the main body of Angola by a finger of land of the Democratic Republic of Congo, which juts out to the west to reach the Atlantic coast.

The growing resentment of the mass of the population is feeding a long-established separatist movement. From the pollution-covered beaches can be seen the offshore oil platforms pumping out oil and wealth for a tiny minority.

Killey showed the Malongo oil complex, which is surrounded by a minefield. Angola is a signatory to the international ban on the laying of minefields, but makes an exception for the oil industry. He reported an increase in Angolan military activity in Cabinda in an attempt to control the separatists. Ordinary people feel the consequences. Many of them are forced out of their villages and become internal refugees living alongside the oil facilities. Killey interviewed one man who had narrowly escaped being killed by soldiers. The soldiers had picked out five men at random in a village to be shot in retaliation for three Angolan soldiers killed.

Another man explained how his wife had been killed when soldiers surrounded all the houses in a village. He had gone to the door to remonstrate with the soldiers, only to hear his son scream out as his wife was shot dead at the back of the house.

Killey tried to interview Angolan government ministers, but none of them wanted to speak to him except the minister responsible for the country's reconstruction, Maria da Luz Cirilo. He asked her if the contrast between the lives of the children living in the sewers and the families of government members living like billionaires could lead to a backlash. She agreed this was possible, but said that the remit of her ministry was to prevent that.

Killey pressed her on how it was possible that the president was able to afford to build two private palaces on

his government salary of \$2,000 per month or how his daughter had come to own one of the two cellular phone companies in Angola and to run a private jet. The minister claimed to be unaware of these facts.

When asked to what extent payments from oil companies had fuelled corruption, she said he should ask the oil companies.

Killey interviewed the American ambassador to Angola, Cintya Efield. She explained that currently America received 5.5 percent of its non-OPEC produced oil from Angola, but that US strategy was to source 20 percent of its total oil supplies from Africa within the next 10 years. Asked to comment about the lavish life styles of the government members and elite compared to the mass of the population, she replied that Angola was "a country coming out of 27 years of war... We know that after that many years of deprivation people do feel a need to reward themselves."

The US wants to treble oil imports from Africa over the next 10 years, much of it from Angola. A report by the Catholic Relief Services (CRS), "Bottom of the Barrel: Africa's Oil Boom and the Poor in 2003" predicts that oil production in Africa will double by 2010 and that the US planned to import 25 percent of its oil from Africa. An investment of \$50 billion by 2010 would be the largest ever in African history.

The report states that "sub-Saharan African governments will receive over \$200 billion in oil revenues over the next decade," but warns of "dramatic development failures" in countries dependent on petro-dollars.

Sam Killey's sympathetic portrayal of the fate of the Angolan masses confronting the might of the oil companies graphically reveals what the development of West Africa as an oil producer means.



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