



# American Friends Service Committee

1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102-1479 • Phone (215) 241-7000

Telex: 247559 AFSC UR  
FAX: 215/864-0104  
Cable: AFSCERCO Philadelphia

Stephen G. Cary  
*Chairperson*

Asia A. Bennett  
*Executive Secretary*

**WAITING FOR PEACE: ANGOLA TODAY**

by

**Carole Collins,**

**Southern Africa International Affairs Representative**

May 26, 1989

NOT FOR REPRINT/QUOTE  
WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION  
OF AFRICA PROGRAMS  
AFSC.

An Affirmative Action Employer

[The purpose of this newsletter is to focus on some aspects of daily life in Luanda, and its outskirts. The aim is to show how the political and war conditions in Angola interact and have affected the fabric of community life.]

\* \* \*

Introduction: For the first-time visitor from the US, Angola breaks many myths and stereotypes. Situated within southern Africa geographically and politically, everyday life in Luanda seems typically West African in culture and commercant economic style. Angola is accused by the US government of being a beachhead for communism and Marxism-Leninism, but one sees the "free market" and privatisation thrive in Angolans' everyday lives and government policies. A five-hour, 300 Km drive down the coast south of Luanda (some of it at night) shatters the image of Angola as completely war-wracked.

As an American, a visit to Angola can be an emotional experience. The US government continues to support the South African-backed rebel group UNITA (National Union for Angola's Total Independence) politically and militarily (aid is officially at \$15 m. a year). I saw the results of this aid in bombed factories, packed orphanages and the numerous amputees on the street. During this visit, as during an earlier one in 1988, Angolans asked courteously and persistently, sometimes with a subtle edge of bitter persistence, why the American people and government continue to support UNITA and deny Angolans the peace they need to develop on their own path.

It is not an easy question to answer. How does one explain to an African people who see themselves righting a burning historic injustice (white minority rule over their people and region), that the US government sees them only as pawns of the USSR and Cuba within an anti-communist East-West framework; that despite the irrepressible spontaneity, initiative and diverse opinions of Angolans one meets, Washington depicts them as helpless victims of a Cuban and Soviet-backed "authoritarian one-party state" that permits them no freedom; that the destruction of their economy and murder of civilians by UNITA forces (backed since 1976 by South African troops, planes and tanks) is described by President Bush's administration as part of the struggle for democracy and freedom.

Angola, still dependent as in the past on the export of primary commodities, is incredibly rich in diamonds (4th largest producer in the early 70s), oil (the top export earner by 1973 after only 5 years' development), iron ore, and coffee (the world's 4th producer in the early 70s). It also produces sisal, sugar, tobacco and cotton. At independence, Angola was almost self-sufficient in food,

produced a maize surplus, and had a large export-oriented fish processing industry. The second most industrialized country in southern Africa at independence in 1975, its factories - before destruction from South African and UNITA attacks - produced many consumer goods and boasted one of the region's few steel mills.

Most of this productivity benefitted only the 5.7% of the population who were Portuguese settlers. Indigenous Angolans were forced from the best lands during colonial times. Even much unskilled labor was done by poor settlers. Commerce remained almost solely in settler hands, including small rural retail shops. Taxi drivers were also poor Portuguese.

The "second war of liberation" starting in 1975 devastated the economy, as infrastructure was damaged, virtually all whites fled abroad (exporting the economic assets with them), and farms and businesses were abandoned. Angola lost most of its educated elite: businessmen, civil servants, commercial farmers, traders, engineers, doctors, teachers. Migration of African workers to avoid the fighting caused dramatic drops in production of diamonds and coffee (by 2/3). Manufacturing output dropped by 70% between 1973 and 1977.

What capacity was not damaged by 1977 in many cases fell victim to later South African aggression or attack by UNITA forces. In 1988, I visited a furniture factory in Lubango which had suffered at least three attacks by South African planes since 1977. Many in southern Africa view Pretoria's aggression against Angolan economic targets as part of its broader regional strategy to deny economic autonomy to its majority-ruled neighbors. With peace, Angola would have been able to provide significant resources toward regional growth and development.

Shortages of goods of all kinds are now a permanent and chronic feature of Angolan life. The government's decision in 1976-77 to import food to feed the urban population has remained for the past 13 years. At present, were it not for oil, Angola's economy would have collapsed. Indeed the drop in world oil prices a few years back forced Angola to borrow heavily to sustain needed imports of consumer and military goods, making it vulnerable to pressures by foreign banks for policy reforms.

I was fortunate to be a guest of the Angolan Women's Organization (OMA) over a total of six weeks spent in Angola between January and April. I went there to attend the 1989 annual summit meeting of the Southern Africa Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), aimed at reducing regional dependency on South Africa and encouraging economic cooperation among member states. I also worked with OMA to

test out before final editing a slide show on technologies that could lighten rural women's work load. The following pages describe daily life in Angola as I experienced it, including major economic and political realities.

### Luanda: Urban Realities

I saw everyday urban life first-hand while living for a month with a friend in the lively bairro (neighborhood) of Sao Paulo. To the amusement of my Angolan friends, I was "uma Americana" living in "blocos Cubanos," apartments built soon after independence for Cuban workers but now housing mostly Angolans. Each bloco, composed of several adjoining predios (small 5-story walk-ups with 10 apartments), was packed full of lively extended families with seemingly endless numbers of children. A city built for at most 300,000, Luanda now hosts over 1- $\frac{1}{2}$  million Angolans fleeing the war in rural areas, or one in six Angolans. [Lack of housing is a critical problem in Luanda and, one observer noted, a possible obstacle to the success of the policy of clemency towards former opponents of the MPLA government. "Who abroad is likely to accept the amnesty when they can't return to a decent house?" he said.]

Near our apartment, a lively, nighttime street market developed during my 4-week stay, creating brief traffic jams as passers-by bought bread, hot food, cigarettes or other small items from an array of market sellers behind tiny tables lit by candles. Nightlife in Luanda is lively, but constrained by the midnight to 5 a.m. curfew. As a result, most parties begin and end early, or more typically start around 10 p.m. and go all night until about 6 a.m. One occasionally hears (and sees) the odd tracer bullet, fired by soldiers patrolling after curfew.

To get the bare necessities of life in Luanda is no easy thing. It demands a certain amount of assertiveness and hustle to deal with both war-caused shortages and Luanda's decaying infrastructure, further disrupted by the war. Two damaged electricity pylons, blown up by UNITA days after the SADCC February meeting, plunged the city into darkness (except for the few buildings - hotels, offices and apartments run by the UN or private oil companies - boasting their own generators). Lacking light, bairro residents migrate to the streets, creating almost a street festival atmosphere as they try to cool off in the hot, sticky February evenings (most keep windows closed at night to limit the spread of already rampant cerebral malaria).

When there was electricity to run the city water pumps, we sometimes got 1-2 hours of water in the morning at the ground-level tap outside our predio. On these days, we queued up with neighbors to fill our pails and bottles with water for washing, cooking and flushing toilets. On days without electricity, most of Luanda's higher areas, like our

bairro, soon had no water. We then joined our neighbors searching for a friend whose house still had water, where we could fill our collection of wine bottles and other containers. By one estimate, 80% of the water entering the city water system does not exit the pipes due to breaks and illegal water tapping. Departing Portuguese settlers stole the blueprints for the city water and sewer systems, making planned repairs difficult and multiplying city health problems linked to lack of water (e.g. recurrent cholera and typhus epidemics).

Garbage disposal is a perennial aesthetic and health problem in Luanda, with numerous puddles of fetid water from broken sewers, green with algae. Many Luandese from rural areas deal with the problem as they would in their village: keeping paths clean but piling garbage high at the furthest edges of their neighborhood. Kids in our bairro made small pin-wheel style toys from the odd avocado pit and twigs. I was told the situation had eased since an East German entrepreneur hired Philippino workers to collect garbage at neighborhood outposts, using Italian trucks!

#### Daily Economic Survival

Urban life is expensive. An unskilled worker may earn 9-10,000 Kwanzas a month. But a bucket of tomatoes costs 1500-2000 Kwanzas, 6-7 peppers about 500 Kwanzas. In the musseques (the name, from colonial times but still used, for older neighborhoods in Luanda where black Angolans traditionally lived) many still lack electricity and running water. A typical family may need 150,000-200,000 Kwanzas per month in order to survive. They often must buy their water for as much as 1000 Kwanzas/day. A family of 5-6 uses a minimum of 800 liters a day.

Everyone in Luanda usually gets by through having one or more "schemas" - literally means schemes that help them get the services or goods they need for everyday life. Some "schemas" are legal: a neighbor gets you some bread (which, because of shortages, is usually distributed through one's workplace) in return for some extra rice. Other "schemas" are illegal, such as when a young man offered to sell me diamonds (all sales are supposed to be controlled by the government!).

Angolans with foreign exchange often buy scarce products, at the low official exchange rate of 30 Kwanzas per US dollar, in the Jumbo or other forex shops run by the UN, EEC and Belgian and Cuban embassies, among others. (One often saw long lines of customers with crates of beer stacked high at the Jumbo check-out counters.) They then barter these goods for other products, or sell them at the parallel market rate (now between 2,500 and 3,000 Kwanzas per US dollar, or 100 times the official rate). It is ironic that the US and IMF don't need to advocate privatization in Angola: it's

already practically rampant.

The war has cut Luanda even more off from rural life, so that in many ways it survives as an enclave economy dependent on imported goods, including food. Elsewhere in Angola (e.g. Huile and Huambo provinces) one finds pockets of productivity, but most of the products can only be consumed locally due to lack of transport and security to move them where needed elsewhere in the country.

### **Mulenvos de Baixo: Rural traditions thrive within the Revolution**

Mulenvos de Baixo typifies many of the problems facing rural Angolans. One reaches this small village by driving about 20 KM south towards the industrial town of Viana. The tarred road, crumbling sometimes dramatically along its edges, takes one past several factories, a military base, some flat grassy fields, a small but lively market and several musseques. Old trucks creaking their way toward Luanda are packed with passengers. Near a military base sporting a large "Venceremos" sign, one turns onto a dusty dirt road past small plots of drought-resistant cassava and a few isolated homesteads. The occasional Baobab tree, its giant trunk swathed in silvery bark amidst twisted branches, seems to stride matronly across the dry, brushy terrain. Mulenvos boasts a small beer hall, a piggery, numerous marauding chickens and is lush with mango, papaya, guava and banana trees.

Mulenvos illustrates the extent to which revolutionary ideology often masks the continuation of the traditional. Diogo Joao Manuel, the 44-year old village coordinator (party official), is also the soba (traditional village chief), as his father and uncle were during colonial times. A coordinator is just another name for a chief, Diogo says. His election by villagers as the coordinator was confirmed by the party, and he is a party militant.

If problems arise (e.g. family tensions or theft), he convenes the village elders and holds a local trial to discuss the rights and wrongs of a particular situation and decide what to do. "We ask them why they stole," says Diogo, "if they were hungry." Only if the problem can't be resolved locally does he approach the Provincial party structures. Mulenvos has a Peasants' Association, membership in which is voluntary. Both men and women work together on the one communal plot. All have individual family plots as well, growing mostly cassava, maize, potatoes and some beans. They barter some of their produce to a state factory in return for other foods (rice, cooking oil, sugar) and soap, hoes and other tools. At a private shop nearby, they can sometimes buy clothes.

Before the war, Mulenvos hosted 90-100 families. But

displaced people forced to flee from Kwanza Sul, Kwanza Norte, Moxico and Huambo provinces have increased the population density (and pressure on the land) to about 1500 families. "We try to help them get plots of land," Diogo says, "and proper documents life ration and identification cards." Without the latter, children cannot gain access to schools after the fourth grade, and families cannot obtain other assistance. Some outside aid for the displaced is provided by the Angolan Red Cross, he told me, and government scholarships have been provided to children of both local residents and displaced people. Documents are needed, Diogo said, to control infiltration by UNITA.

A major problem for many villages is lack of transport to get their produce to town. At independence, departing Portuguese settlers took over 80% of all cars and trucks out of the country, leading to a collapse of rural transport and commodity exchange which was dependent on that transport. The 14-year war has continued to undermine incentives to produce beyond subsistence, as there is almost nothing available to buy in many rural areas.

Despite efforts to change village realities, "we can't create the new man if the war doesn't end," Diogo said. "If it continues, though, we'll just have to stay strong."