



# Angola: A Brief History

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*Mu' xi ietu ia Luuanda mubita ima ikuata sonii.....*

“In this our land of Luanda painful things are happening.....” (from a popular folk tale)

## **Introduction**

Angola endured five centuries of Portuguese colonial rule and almost continuous war in the last forty years that has left little in the form of economic, educational and social development to benefit the Angolan people. The war also displaced an estimated 4 million people. Today, government support for social institutions is weak. Hospitals are without medicines, schools are without books, and public employees lack the basic supplies for their day-to-day work. An entire generation of young people in Angola were born and raised in an atmosphere of violence and gunfire. Over half of the 14 million people in Angola are under the age of 19. The United Nations International Fund for Children (UNICEF) reports that Angola is one of the most dangerous places for children with landmines equal to the number of children.

## **Historical Background**

### ***The Origin of the Population***

The original inhabitants of present day Angola were Khoikhoi speakers. During the first century of this era, Bantu speakers started to migrate and settled in most of northern Angola. Angola derives its name from the Bantu Kingdom of *Ndongo*, whose name for its king is *ngola*. The main influx of people took place during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, just before the first contact with the Portuguese.

### ***Angola under the Portuguese***

Explored by the Portuguese navigator, Diego Cao in 1482, Angola became a link in trade with India and Southeast Asia. Later, it was a major source of slaves for Portugal's new world colony, Brazil, and for the Americas, including the United States. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a massive forced labour system had replaced formal slavery and would continue until outlawed in 1961. Except for a short occupation by the Dutch (1641-1648) Angola was under Portugal's control until 1975. Following World War II, independence movements began in Angola but were brutally suppressed by the Portuguese military force. Portugal, under the Salazar and Caetano dictatorships, rejected independence. Consequently, (three) independence movements emerged. Angola was finally granted independence on November 11, 1975 after guerrilla groups joined forces with the army and overthrew the Portuguese government in a military coup. The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) which had led the independence movement, has controlled the government ever since.

### ***War in Post-Independence Angola***

The ideological differences between the independence movements eventually led to a full-scale civil war. The political propaganda of one movement against another gave rise to

unprecedented racial and tribal hatred. Towns and factories were bombed, roads mined, water supplies sabotaged and villages attacked. The massacre of civilians became an everyday occurrence. Food rationing and black market conditions made daily survival a challenge. In the 1980's, Angola became a cold war battleground when the Soviet Union and Cuba supported the then Marxist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), while the United States and white-ruled South Africa backed the anticommunist National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) as a bulwark against Soviet interests in Africa.

### ***The Struggle for Reconstruction***

A peace agreement signed in April 2002 ended the 27 year old civil war that devastated the country. Despite the agreement, disarmament and demobilization provisions have not yet been fully implemented. Angola now faces the daunting tasks of rebuilding its devastated infrastructure and of resettling tens of thousands of refugees who fled the fighting. Hopeful signs exist and the overall picture will change with time. The global community's support and assistance is vital to reconstruction.

According to the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), as of December 2004, more than three-quarters of the estimated 400,000 refugees had returned to Angola. Some non-governmental organizations that have focused on civic education programs with a view to assisting former soldiers and their families, are now in the process of being expanded to include education about elections and democracy.

Angola's economy is slowly improving. The Angolan economy is highly dependent on its oil sector, which accounts for over 40% of gross domestic product (GDP) and almost 90% of government revenues. A sharp increase in oil production caused Angola's real GDP to grow by 15.3% in 2002, followed by a 2003 growth rate of 4.9% and is expected to see further growth in 2005. Although Angola saw 98% inflation in 2003, it was a considerable improvement over the 141% inflation rate in 2001 and the 325% inflation rate in 2000. Inflation is further expected to drop to 45% in 2005. In 2002, Angola agreed to an International Monetary Fund (IMF) Staff Monitored Program (SMP) to enact economic reforms, with the hope of eventually obtaining additional lending from the IMF and World Bank. While the IMF itself may not directly provide many of the resources that Angola needs, the relationship between the two is greatly amplified by the scrutiny and importance attached to it by the donor community, the private sector, and the non-governmental organizations.

According to a UN statement at the 61<sup>st</sup> session in March 2005, democracy is being consolidated in Angola by reinforcing democratic institutions and strengthening the judiciary's independence from the political apparatus. The government's budget for 2005 reflected its drive to foster socio-economic development together with democracy as part of its national reconciliation policy.

An inter-governmental commission has been set up to handle preparations for elections in 2006. International aid and participation has reinforced credibility of the preparatory phase. Many members of non-governmental organizations (NGO's) report that expectations are high among Angolan people, most of whom are young adults who are keen for change and a better future.

## Angola: Fast Facts

*Population:* 14.5 million (UN 2005)

*Capital:* Luanda

*Area:* 1.25m sq km (3 times the size of California)

*GNI per capita:* \$740. US (World Bank 2003)

*Major Exports:* Oil, diamonds, minerals, coffee, fish, timber, cotton

*Major Imports:* Consumer goods, capital goods, machinery, vehicles

*Major Import Sources:* Portugal, the United States, South Africa, Spain and Brazil

*Main Employer:* Agriculture

*Life Expectancy:* 39 years (men) 41 years (women) (UN 2005)

*Major Religion:* Christianity

*Languages:* (Official) Portuguese, Koongo, Mbundu, Chokwe, Mbunda, Kwanyama (Oxikuanyama). There are 41 languages spoken in Angola.

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