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Diamonds, Oil Finance a Quarter Century of War in Angola

Photo: An Angolan soldier known as "Bernardo" walks through the destroyed town of Cuito as a man who lost his leg to a landmine walks on crutches behind him. International charity groups cleared thousands of landmines in Angola after the government and UNITA rebels signed a United Nations-brokered peace accord in 1994. However, large areas are reported to have been mined again since the two decade old civil war reignited in December 1998. AP Photo /AmiCohen

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As Americans are bombarded by ads urging them to add various products to their Christmas shopping lists, many US consumers will purchase their loved ones an item that has long been a Christmas favorite: diamond jewelry. Americans buy 65 percent of the world's diamonds, but few know the origin of the gemstones that adorn their rings, necklaces and earrings. Experts estimate that 30 percent of the diamond industry's global profit comes from gemstones mined in war-torn regions of Africa like Angola, where a 25-year-old civil war is partly being fueled by diamond sales.

On Saturday, November 11, Angola celebrated its 25th anniversary of independence from Portuguese rule. Most Angolans, many of whom have known nothing but intermittent war, responded coolly to President Eduardo

Dos Santos's calls for celebration. The slogan "25 years of dignity, 25 years of liberty," rang hollow for many living through the longest-raging civil war in Africa, a conflict that has claimed 500,000 lives and displaced 2.7 million - as one commentator noted, "for many Angolans it is 25 years of war and suffering."

In 1991 the UN sponsored a peace accord calling for the government to hold elections in which UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), the rebel group led by Jonas Savimbi, were permitted to participate as a political party. The fragile peace collapsed in 1994 when Savimbi dismissed the elections as fraudulent after the first round of balloting and withdrew to the bush with his followers, vowing to resume the civil war.

Savimbi has held since 1975 that the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) government is "illegitimate," representing a white and mestizo elite put in place by the Portuguese, while UNITA represents the country's poor black majority. In 1998, the Dos Santos government undertook a major offensive against the rebels.

After 25 years of war in this diamond- and oil-rich African nation, Angola's economy is in shambles and the economic indicators are grim. 82 percent of Angola's 12 million inhabitants live in poverty, and about 80 percent are unemployed. Three out of five children die before the age of 5, and the average life expectancy is 42. An estimated 51.1 percent of Angola's population lives in poverty, deprived of social services and education. And more than 100,000 "mutilados" suffer from terrible disfigurement inflicted by landmines, which infest rural areas.

To commemorate the anniversary, about 3,000 people gathered in Independence Plaza in Luanda, the capital, where President Dos Santos unveiled a monument honoring Antonio Agostinho Neto, the first president of independent Angola. Church groups and workers marched in the plaza chanting "Peace and freedom," "We want to rebuild this country," and "Unity and reconciliation," as loudspeakers broadcasted a 1975 speech in which Neto celebrated his country's recently-won autonomy. "I declare the independence of Angola before the eyes of Africa and the entire world," Neto said then.

But as one Agence France-Press reported noted, "many Angolans in the plaza remembered different words from their first president: 'Agriculture is the base of industry, and the decisive factor for development.'"

Once considered the breadbasket of southern Africa, Angola's arable land is now riddled with 8 to 15 million landmines, and this potential foodstuffs exporter is now facing a 670,000 ton grain shortage that has left nearly 4 million people dependent on humanitarian aid for food.

Days before the independence celebrations, President Dos Santos offered the UNITA rebels amnesty. The president of the Angolan parliament, Roberto de Almeida, said UNITA members would be pardoned if they "renounced crime and turned their backs on a shadowy past. Angola has been at war until now because of the obstinacy of those who have chosen the way of arms. For us, peace is a fundamental priority."

In a text released for the anniversary celebrations, the government stated that it saw UNITA as "more and more convinced it will not be able to impose its will militarily on Angola's millions."

"We have to bring an end to the war once and for all so that we can use our resources for the reconstruction and the progress of the nation," stated De Almeida. "Nobody is going to prevent us from fulfilling our dream of reconciliation, peace and development. State institutions are being transformed and the public has realized that with democracy, economic stability and serious government, there is no reason to suffer from hunger."

UNITA's military command rejected Dos Santos' amnesty offer, saying it was "nothing more than bait." Renewed fighting has broken out between the national army and UNITA rebels in the northern part of the country. The Roman Catholic radio network Ecclesia reported that UNITA had taken control of Quiculongo, a town about 100 miles east of Luanda, which had been under army control.

According to the BBC, UNITA Secretary-General Paolo Lukamba said his movement could not accept amnesty proposed by a president who had no legitimacy, and presented the Dos Santos government with a number of counter-proposals, including the establishment of a new government, increased press freedom and the de-politicization of the army and the police. Dos Santos has rebuffed the proposals, saying the only solution was for UNITA to give up the war.

Many observers hope that the US can help broker a peace between the warring parties, but historically the US role in the conflict has not been as mediator. Since 1985, the US has supported UNITA's "anti-communist freedom-fighters" against Angola's Soviet- and Cuban-backed MPLA government, but Dos Santos's embrace of free-market capitalism led to a gradual thawing of relations and the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1993. The US currently gets 8 percent of its oil from Angola (more than from Kuwait), and this past June the Angolan ambassador in Washington announced that Sonangol, the country's oil company, had made a deal with World Airways, an American airline, to establish a "direct air link" between Houston and Luanda.

"The Angolan people are tired of war as a business and want peace," said Horace Campbell, a professor at Syracuse University and author of a forthcoming book on Angola. "Moreover, the UN must do more to tighten the sanctions against the military wing of the Savimbi organization. We do know of the close relationship between the Bushes and Savimbi and he is waiting for more overt support from his friends in the USA."

The civil war has partly been sustained over the last 25 years by Angola's abundant natural resources. As a recent article in the New Yorker magazine entitled "Blood and Oil" noted, "Oil money enables the government to stay involved in the long, expensive civil war that has turned Angola into a hell-hole where the towns of the interior are cut off from one another because bridges have been blown up and the roads are rife with heavily armed, murderous marauders and three million people need international human assistance to avoid starving to death."

The government of Angola has announced that it will raise its production of oil to one million barrels by the end of 2000, making oil earnings account for 95 percent of the government's revenue. Most of that revenue will go to financing the war effort, but, according to some critics, a large portion will also be embezzled by members of a government reputed by many to be notoriously corrupt.

According to Global Witness, a British human rights advocacy organization, "the Angolan government had mortgaged several years' worth of future oil

revenues and had used cash advances from Western oil companies to buy military hardware.... [A] significant portion of Angola's oil-derived wealth is being subverted for personal gain and to support the aspirations of elite individuals.... Corruption starts with the head of state, surrounded by a clique of politicians and business cronies."

Angolan oil output is expected to increase still further in the future: oil was recently discovered deep below the waters off the Angolan coast - when exploited, the additional oil deposits will make Angola the most oil-rich country in Africa, surpassing Nigeria.

Diamond revenues are also projected to rise. As the government has gained control of diamond-rich areas formerly under rebel control, President Dos Santos has increased gem-mining 26 percent since 1998, making some \$31 million off taxes in the diamond industry - compared to only \$4 million in 1995. Much of the government's revenue goes toward military expenditures. As both UNITA and the government exploit the country's diamond resources for arms expenditures, average Angolans benefit very little.

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