*by Clarice Taylor, CARE*

# Can We Face the Landmine Victims?

A crowd of "mutilados," Portuguese for the mutilated ones, gathered outside the CARE office in Menongue, Angola. Among them were a few with prosthetic limbs, mostly ill fitting. As for the rest of the legless, they got around on crutches that looked like found objects. Several people in the crowd had lost an arm, one person was missing both. Another man had the requisite number of arms and legs, but no hands. These were survivors of landmines.

Missing from the group were the women, except one, a young woman, her prosthetic leg covered to the knee with a dingy white sock. As is commonly the case with women who have survived the trauma and mutilation of landmine explosions, her family still depends heavily on her. With water to fetch, meals to prepare, and children and elders to care for, she had found the time to come, along with 50 men that day last month. They had heard that a stranger from America was there to talk with them about their lives and their future.

Angola is twice the size of Texas, yet within its 481,000 square miles are an estimated 15 million-plus landmines, about 1.5 mines for each person. Even half that in the United States would be seen as a crisis of staggering size. Angola's mines are a Cold War legacy that many choose to forget. They were laid during the decades of superpower-supported Civil War that followed Angola's independence from Portugal. Twenty years later, nearly 77,000 of Angola's citizens are mutilados.

I spoke with a "mutilada" named Domingas Manuela. A pretty 25-year-old who looked more like 16, Manuela's face was calm, even a little wistful, as she told me about her life. She stepped on a mine in 1992 on her way to buy cassavas for her family. Abandoned by her husband after her injury and no longer able to farm her own field, she still suffers from grief and shock. Her plans to provide for her parents and children have been turned upside down. Still, she tries to contribute to the household, buying oil to sell in the market. Oil is heavy, so she makes many trips on her prosthetic leg, and earns just enough to survive.

Joao Baptista worked at a local hospital for 20 years before he was drafted as a military nurse. One day as he accompanied an injured soldier to find medical treatment, the car ran over a mine, killing the driver and injuring Baptista's legs. After a grueling 50-mile journey, his colleagues finally got him to doctors who could amputate both legs and save his life. Baptista's desire to help others was not diminished. Once able, he returned to work in the hospital and has since been made the elder of his community. Yet now at 52, his injuries make it difficult for him to earn a living.

These two are among nearly 21,000 mutilados in the Cuando Cubango province of Angola. Their tragedy is compounded by the fear that the same thing can happen at any time to their friends and loved ones. Fenced in by landmines, the people of Menongue struggle to see the future. Until the mines are gone they cannot pass on their traditional livelihoods, rebuild their country, or pause to dream.

As I waited at the airstrip to leave, I caught sight of a young mutilado, a donated Nike sneaker on his prosthetic foot. He was shy, but I managed to learn that Pedro is 10 years old, an orphan, and he lost his leg in a landmine explosion. I saw behind his shy gaze a look of keen intelligence, reminding me of my 14-year-old daughter.

Some U.S. military experts contend that anti-personnel mines are a "combat multiplier," freeing our forces for other operations. For me, two things are certain: one, landmines are multipliers of misery for hundreds of thousands of innocents, turning communities into theaters of war long after the combat is over; and two, this is a pivotal moment for the establishment of a new international standard of decency. This standard will have no place for landmines.

The Clinton administration said it would go to Oslo, Norway, to seek a quick ban on this terror. By seeking special status in its demands for exceptions, the United States risked diluting, even killing, the possibility of a treaty of any value. The mutilados of today and tomorrow seemed far from Clinton's mind as his delegates pushed to accommodate Pentagon demands to exempt anti-personnel mines on the Korean Peninsula, continue the use of smart mines and allow a loophole through which to cop out if expedient.

Talking with them, the policy arguments fade and one is left staring into wounded eyes. Baptista, Manuela, and the others shared their experiences with me, understanding that I would convey their words as a testimony of the powerless to those who have the power and who share in the moral responsibility to eradicate the scourge of landmines. ■

***Landmines are multipliers of misery for hundreds of thousands of innocents, turning communities into theaters of war long after the combat is over.***