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Helen Long
War Child

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Angola, An Eyewitness Report of the Landmine Crisis

By Helen Long, War Child

May the world not watch and wait too long before the insidious truth of mine warfare is recognized for what it is, genocide in slow motion.

Leaving the humidity and incessant noise of the Angolan capital, Luanda, whose streets are cluttered with cars and bands of children who subsist on a diet of refuse and insults, the elderly Hercules, a plane loaded with American corn, climbed unsteadily into the gray monsoon sky. It was the second flight the Hercules had made that morning to Malange, the northwestern provincial capital, and another ten planes laden with food were scheduled to follow that day. Malange is just one of more than 20 destinations that food and relief supplies are flown to everyday to keep alive the 2 million registered displaced and war-affected Angolans, one-sixth of the total population.

Thirty years of Civil War in Angola has involved, at one time or another, every regional and major power, from the former colonizers, Portugal, to the regional hegemon, South Africa, and also includes the former Soviet Union, Cuba, and the United States. This has left Angola utterly destroyed and littered with more landmines than people. This is the heaviest-mined country in the world, with more than 70,000 mine-disabled people. Mines have made the U.N. relief program one of the largest and most expensive air operations in the world. In 1994 alone, more than 200,000 tons of food were delivered throughout Angola at a cost of \$100 million. It is an expense the international community admits it cannot afford to continue paying.

Working in mined areas, one is taught to keep to a well-used path, or follow in the ox-cart tracks or the hardened footprints of others. While this procedure can not guarantee 100-percent safety, I have to admit, in Angola, I dared not put any trust in surfaces that were not paved.

In similarly mined countries, such as Cambodia and Afghanistan, development is able at least to coexist with mines, albeit with difficulty. In Angola, this is not the case. Mines are everywhere, on roads, around bombed-out bridges and airport runways, along riverbanks and railway tracks, and in and around towns, villages and forests.

Flying eastwards into the sun, the sprawling tin-roofed coastal city gives way unexpectedly to an emerald expanse of lush, green valleys and shimmering rivers which run off in all directions like strands of broken thread. Mile after mile, for as far as the eye can see, the earth is draped with a carpet of jade, which is broken only by the occasional abandoned village and cluster of towering tree-covered peaks rising and falling away sharply below us. This is nature at its finest, and I am simply stunned. I have photographed and interviewed hundreds of mine casualties all over the world, helped Medivac countless numbers more, and walked in mine fields in three continents. Ironically, it is at 32,000 feet above the earth that the magnitude and the sheer scale of the landmine catastrophe hit me.

Angola is a country which is one of the most resource-rich in the world, and which is endowed with an excellent climate in many of its regions, yet its infrastructure lies in ruins, its roads are choked with mines and its people are starving to death. No one knows how many people remain trapped in the hinterlands, unable to make the long, hazardous journey by foot to the feeding centers, which are based mostly in the capital and provincial towns.

As the battered, formerly besieged town of Malange appears below, the Hercules begins its spiraling descent. All aircraft are obliged to land and take off in this way to avoid groundfire. Sure enough, as the plane turns in ever decreasing circles like a piece of drift wood caught in a whirlpool, the white, shattered remains of an aircraft, lying within yards of the runway, comes into view. It is a reminder of the long war and the risks foreign-aid workers face everyday. The previous summer, the South African pilot told me, a relief plane had overshot the runway we were about to approach and hit a mine which blew out the front tire sending a blast-wave smashing through the cockpit, injuring the crew inside. Mines surround the runway and the perimeter of the airport. No one knows how many have been planted, but most people know not to walk there.

Malange, is one of five towns that were fought over for several years by the Soviet-backed Marxist Government troops and the U.S.-sponsored UNITA guerrillas. As in so many of Africa and Asia's Civil Wars, the landmine was

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the weapon of choice. Since the signing of the Lusaka Peace Accord at the end of 1994, a fragile peace has been restored to the provincial capitals, but the Lusaka protocols can never be extended to include the cessation of death and injury caused everyday by mines. I visited four of Angola's 18 provinces, and everyday, I saw between one and five people brought into the hospital having been blown up by a mine that had been laid within the town. No where else in the world that I have worked have I seen this number of people injured and killed within such a confined area on such a regular basis.

Working in mined areas, one is taught to keep to a well-used path, or follow in the ox-cart tracks or the hardened footprints of others. While this procedure cannot guarantee 100-percent safety, I have to admit, in Angola, I dared not put any trust in surfaces that were not paved. Driving through the shell-pocked streets toward the hospital, we see swathes of hungry, ragged people with flame-colored hair, the result of slow starvation, waiting in empty market squares and bombed-out warehouses to receive their daily food ration.

At the hospital, a tumbling, dank, evil-smelling three-story building, the international medical agency, "Medicin Sans Frontieres," (MSF) receives a mother and her sick 8-day-old son in the agency's intensive feeding center. The woman, whose husband and five other children were murdered by UNITA soldiers six weeks earlier, has made the exhausting five day trek to Malange from Cacuso, 200 kilometers west of the town. Cacuso, until recently, was cut off from the outside world. The main road heading out of Malange toward the district town is mined and the bridges on either side of Cacuso are destroyed.

The Dutch MSF doctor gently tells the woman her child has tetanus and will not live another day. The mother slowly turned away from the child and sat staring with empty eyes, her expressions of despair, exhaustion and utter defeat frozen on her face. The small, makeshift ward is absolutely silent, save for the struggling, rasping breath of the tiny infant. This is the indirect but equally cruel impact of mines. Had the roads been open and the bridges standing, international agencies like UNICEF would have been able to inoculate the woman and others like her during her pregnancy.

While mines continue to reduce huge countries like Angola to little more than a series of small, isolated pockets, countless numbers of people will go on dying needlessly from simple, domestic accidents, treatable diseases, and, of course, from mine explosions. No one knows how many people have been killed in Angola by landmines. The people I saw brought in to the hospitals all died either from the want of adequate medical care or from their injuries. Add to the daily toll the numbers of people who die as an indirect result of landmines, like the 8-day old baby from Cacuso, and the people who will be killed or injured tomorrow, and the day after, and the year after that. It should not be a surprise that those killed and irreparably damaged by mines should greatly exceed the numbers killed and wounded during the war itself. May the world not watch and wait too long before the insidious truth of mine warfare is recognized for what it is: genocide in slow motion.

Contact Information:

War Child UK (International)
Ground floor, Unit 3, 5-8 Anglers Lane
London NW5 3DG
United Kingdom
Phone: (44) 171 916 9276
Fax: (44) 171 916 9280
Email: mail@warchild.globalnet.co.uk
Website: <http://www.warchild.org>