

Angola (1975 - 2002)

In 1974, as Angola emerged from its 14-year war for independence from Portugal, the two major rebel groups that had fought the colonial power struggled against each other for national control. The 27 years of civil war that followed killed an estimated 800,000 people and displaced nearly 4 million from their homes. The history of this war cannot be divorced from the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles of Angola's neighbors, Namibia and South Africa, nor from the Cold War logic in which the Soviet Union and the United States backed opposing sides in any conflict. Although the war diminished in intensity with the withdrawal of external troops and support at the end of the Cold War, the fighting in Angola persisted through 2002, when a UN-backed peace accord officially ended the conflict.

Soon after Angolan independence, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) gained the support of South Africa and the United States in its struggle against the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). This alliance was more strategic than ideological, as UNITA's stronghold was in the south along the border with Namibia, where South Africa was fighting a war. In exchange for South African arms and military support, UNITA targeted the Namibian independence fighters as well as the MPLA, which enjoyed the support of Angola's small urban middle class and was backed by the USSR and Cuba.

The MPLA exercised marginal control over the capital (and its central government), while UNITA struggled to control the hinterlands and the coast. UNITA financed itself with sales from diamonds, which came to be called "blood diamonds" for their role in fueling the war. The MPLA, on the other hand, relied mainly on sales of oil. UNITA focused on sabotaging communications and economic targets. The MPLA, with the help of Cuban troops, tried to root out UNITA strongholds. Both organizations committed atrocities against the civilian populations including physical assaults, rape, mutilations, forced conscription, abduction of women and girls, looting, and extra-judicial executions.

In the late 1980s, the military struggle came to a stalemate as Cuban troops maneuvered against South African air power. Negotiations for a pull-out of foreign forces in Angola became intermingled with talks for Namibian independence. The pull-out, which was completed in 1991, paved the way for Angolan elections in 1992. The MPLA won the first round, but the required second round never happened as UNITA launched new raids against the MPLA. Peace talks continued through the end of the decade, with an abortive agreement signed in Lusaka in 1994. International pressure on UNITA mounted, and the United Nations Security Council imposed increasingly tough sanctions on UNITA, including a ban on diamond exports in 1998. The death of UNITA leader Joseph Savimbi in 2002 at the hands of government troops finally brought UNITA to the table, and two months later a peace accord brought an end to the war. Landmines still litter the countryside and contribute to the ongoing civilian casualties.

Print Resources

Cilliers, Jakkie and Christian Dietrich (2000) *Angola's War Economy: The role of oil and diamonds*. Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies.

Anderson, Jon Lee (2000) "Letter from Angola: Oil and Blood." *The New Yorker* August 14, pp. 46-59.



>> MODERN CONFLICTS
HOME PAGE

>> CONFLICTS MAP

>> CONFLICTS TABLE

>> PERI HOME PAGE

Frynas, Jędrzej George and Geoffrey Wood (2001) "Oil & War in Angola." *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 90, pp. 587-606.

Online Resources

Global Witness (2002) "All the Presidents' Men."

International Crisis Group (2003) "Angola's Choice: Reform or Regress."

United Nations Security Council (2000) *Report of the Panel of Experts on Violations of Security Council Sanctions Against UNITA*.

Human Rights Watch (2003) *Struggling Through Peace: Return and Resettlement in Angola*.

BBC News. *Country Profile and Timeline*.

Reuters Alertnet. *Country Profile*.

Timeline

1961 - Guerilla war against Portuguese rule begins

1974 - Coup in Portugal leads to dissolution of the empire

1975 - MPLA takes control of government; UNITA-MPLA war begins

1988 - Foreign forces in Angola agree to withdraw

1989 - UNITA and MPLA sign, break peace agreement

1991 - MPLA renounces Marxism in favor of Social Democracy; Lisbon peace deal

signed by MPLA, UNITA, creates Constitutional government

1992 - Elections give majority to MPLA, but second-round elections postponed as UNITA resumes fighting

1993 - UN imposes sanctions on UNITA

1994 - Lusaka peace accords signed by MPLA and UNITA

1995 - UN peacekeepers arrive

1998 - Fighting resumes; UN Security Council sanctions diamond exports

1999 - UN pulls out

2002 - UNITA leader Savimbi killed; UNITA signs peace agreement with MPLA

2003 - UN oversight mission ends