Protecting production in Africa’s forgotten war

By Anthony Robbins, CARE International UK

Still bearing the brunt of a 30-year civil war, millions of Angolans are facing severe food and fuel shortages, artillery attacks on many of the main cities, and the terror of being caught between two warring forces.

There are now more than one million internally displaced people in Angola, two-thirds of who are women and children, according to the United Nations Children's Fund. Hundreds of thousands of Angolans face severe malnutrition, disease and death, and the intensifying civil war shows no prospects for any real peace process to begin.

Donor activity has been so low that Kofi Annan himself appealed to the international donor community in June to "urgently support humanitarian activities in Angola to avoid a massive human tragedy."

But donor response - from across the globe - remains inadequate, partially because of the hopelessness of the Angolan situation, but also because the world's attention these past few months has been fixed on the Balkan crisis.

Though the Angolan government sells oil to foreign companies it spends much of this money was spent on arms and remains heavily in debt. So health and education go by the board. Soldiers on both sides live off the land and the people: forcing people to give food, stealing crops, hijacking vehicles. Neither side will back down. All roads are unsafe, with ambushes common: in two separate attacks, humanitarian aid workers in well-identified vehicles were brutally slain.

Most of the countryside is under UNITA control, with the government holding the besieged cities, flooded with more than a million people who have fled unsafe rural areas. UNITA continues to inflict damaging attacks on government forces. Food, fuels and just about everything else are scarce in the provincial cities, since they can be supplied only by air. High prices put food and other commodities out of reach for most ordinary Angolans. In UNITA held areas where agriculture and trading have come to an abrupt halt, virtually nothing is available aside from subsistence farming products. Most of the harvest is taken by the UNITA troops. People are kept inside
UNITA areas by terror force and, of course, land mines. Some people who have fled the UNITA onslaught have come out wearing clothes made of tree bark.

CARE International has had to re-work its longerterm development projects to provide emergency assistance to those in immediate need. It continues its health, agriculture and humanitarian mine action projects, mostly in Kuito, the provincial capital of Bié Province in Angola's Central Planalto region. But the situation is so bad that our teams are restricted to working within about ten kilometres of Kuito town. Currently over 72,000 displaced people are crowded into Kuito town, with hundreds more arriving every day. To reduce the pressure on the town, CARE International is currently working with local agencies to designate 'safe zones' within a 10km radius of Kuito town to move people into temporary accommodation.

Using supplies from the World Food Programme (WFP) CARE fed about 50,000 internally displaced people in May. During June and July we were only able to feed children, the sick and the vulnerable from among those displaced. In August we fed 72,000 using partial WFP rations - but even the full WFP ration meets only 60 percent of people's dietary needs and currently there are no supplies of two essential foods - lentils and oil. World Food Programme food stocks and funds for its transport are not adequate to meet needs in Kuito, nor in any other part of Angola.

**Focus on Landmines**

It is impossible to estimate the number of mines in Angola. Even conservative guesses put it at somewhere around the 20 million mark. It remains one of the most heavily-mined countries in the world. These hidden killers are a legacy of a 30-year civil war. More mines are planted every day by both sides of the conflict and continue to kill and maim ordinary Angolans every day. Already some 70,000 Angolans are believed to have lost limbs as a result of landmine explosions but the threat of death or serious injury becomes even greater as a growing number of displaced people risk wandering into unmarked minefields in unknown territory. Women and children are in constant risk of death or injury due to landmines whilst foraging for food and firewood on the outskirts of the town. Lack of food is forcing people - often women - to venture further out of the city limits in the search for wild roots, leaves, small animals and fuelwood which they need to sell in order to buy household essentials.

CARE International would never have become involved in landmines clearance and awareness work had mines not been cited as the main obstacle to development. Their presence has prevented rural refugees from returning home and beginning their work on their farms once again.

The focus of our landmines work remains on freeing up land to return it to community use. Removing or destroying every known mine is simply too great a task for CARE's teams, so sites where landmines might be planted are surveyed, mapped and, where mines and explosives ordnance are found, marked clearly. This way people know where it's safe to farm, graze cattle and fetch water.

This year alone our teams have trained almost 5,000 people in mine awareness, destroyed or marked over 100 mines or unexploded ordnance, and assessed four camp sites and surrounding agricultural land for temporary but safe resettlement of internally displaced people.

As an integral part of this programme, agriculture activities have been initiated for up to 15,000 displaced farm families. Work is under way with the government of Angola in order to allocate quality arable land on the outskirts of Kuito. To boost this programme CARE has distributed seeds and hand tools, and provided technical assistance to help improve harvests.

Nearly all of the above activities face funding constraints due to lack of donor interest, especially the CARE-Angola Humanitarian Mine Action Project.

The project is a successful model for the integration of demining and mines awareness with health and agriculture
programmes; yet the future funding of this groundbreaking work remains uncertain. The laying of new mines by both sides in the civil war, which automatically eliminates some potential donors, explains only part of this.

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