

Angola

Angola is one of the richest African countries in terms of its natural resources, but years of colonial exploitation followed by the liberation struggle and civil war have left the majority of its population impoverished. It is located on the west coast of southern Africa, north of Namibia, and shares a border with Botswana, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The population of 14 million is small for the large land area. Its greatest resource is oil, found offshore, but it also has diamonds and iron in the interior, as well as land and climate suitable for ranching, and for growing coffee, maize, and cotton.

The Portuguese first colonised the coastal area of Angola in the sixteenth century, but made little progress inland until the late nineteenth century. Portuguese colonial policies were extremely harsh, based on forced labour for the plantations and farms operated by Portuguese settlers. Portugal was itself a fascist dictatorship until the 1970's, with an underdeveloped economy. The purpose of colonisation was to use profits from the territories to support the very weak Portuguese economy. Most of the settlers were themselves impoverished and poorly educated Portuguese peasants. Services provided for Africans were almost non-existent, but a significant mixed race population developed in the cities, where they were able to access education more easily.

Resistance to Portuguese rule developed under extremely difficult conditions. The MPLA organisation was created by merging several groups in 1956, but it had to operate clandestinely. Terror was used to destroy these first underground networks in the 1960's, and this led to the decision to wage a "protracted popular and revolutionary war". Two rival Angolan liberation movements, FNLA and UNITA, also operated against the Portuguese government.

It was only in 1974, when the Portuguese fascist dictatorship was overthrown by an army coup in Lisbon, that there was hope that Angola would soon be independent and embark on development for the benefit of the Angolan people. A transitional government of the three political movements was established in January 1975, but fighting broke out among them. In November 1975, the MPLA, operating on its own, declared the People's Republic, but this did not result in peace and development. The majority of the settlers fled to Portugal or Brazil, leaving a trail of destruction behind and a serious lack of technical, professional and managerial skills in the country. The South Africans and Zaireans invaded from the south and northeast, in support of their protégés, UNITA and FNLA. Although they were driven out, with help from Cuba, UNITA remained a threat and pursued a long-lasting civil war. Angola became a pawn in the cold war. While FNLA soon disintegrated, UNITA continued to fight with financial, diplomatic and technical support from both South Africa and the U.S.A. The MPLA backed by the Soviet Union and Cuba, never lost control of the central government, but was seriously weakened by the need to concentrate all its energies on the continuing war.

When the Cold War ended and apartheid was defeated at the beginning of the 90's, UNITA was persuaded to end their resistance and participate in elections. However, although some members of UNITA accepted their positions in the new parliament, the

UNITA leader, Jonas Savimbi, himself refused to accept the result, and returned with a large number of his followers to the bush war. Angola was devastated, as he financed a continued struggle by selling illegal diamonds. The resistance only ended in 2002 with Savimbi's death.

As civil war ebbed and flowed in Angola for nearly 30 years, immeasurable destruction was visited on property and people. All systems broke down and millions fled to neighbouring countries and to the major cities. Agriculture was virtually abandoned; transport and communication systems were in tatters. The discovery and development of massive reserves of petroleum off the coast and in the Cabinda enclave ensured that there was money to carry on the war for a whole generation. It also raised the stakes, because whoever controlled government could tap into enormous wealth. By the end of the war an unbelievably corrupt elite had gained a grip not only on the MPLA but also over the whole country. They enjoy an ostentatiously privileged lifestyle supported by the national wealth, in spite of their continuing claim to espouse a socialist ideology.

However, now there is peace, and the focus is turning towards developing services and attracting investment to rebuild agriculture, mining, transport and communication links and a variety of services.

During the war, most services collapsed, including the legal system, which in fact had never served the majority of the people. It is an uphill struggle to put in place an Angolan legal system that has its roots in Portuguese law, but serves Angolans. Considering that courts are non-existent in many places, even in towns, the task ahead is daunting. One of the most important needs is for legally trained personnel, in order to make justice delivery possible. At the same time, human rights activists are aware of the need to inculcate in people a consciousness that with peace there is a chance for people to claim what is justly theirs. The role of paralegals in this developing system is likely to become very important, but is still in the process of being defined.