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Angolans Come Home to 'Negative Peace'

By LYDIA POLGREEN

M'BANZA CONGO, Angola — The journey took only a few hours — a brisk, bumpy ride of 60 miles in the bed of a truck along a rutted, red dirt road. It was a nanosecond compared with the five years that Emmanuel Antonio, his wife and six children had spent as refugees across the border in Congo.

This was the ride home. As the convoy bounced along, Mr. Antonio's older children slumbered at his feet, oblivious to the bone-rattling bumps, and his 32-year-old wife, Madelena Merneza, cradled their youngest, Dani, 2, in her arms.

Finally setting foot again on Angolan soil, in the border town of Luvo, and waiting in line for a stamp from immigration officials, Mr. Antonio searched the moment for joy. He found only worry.

"My family must come home because we are Angolans," said Mr. Antonio, 38, a farmer. "Now we have peace. We can only hope that there will be peace until the end."

The civil war, which killed at least half a million Angolans and displaced more than a third of this country's 13 million people, has been over for more than a year. Since then, more than a million people like Mr. Antonio have returned to a country physically, politically and economically in ruins.

Their return is perhaps the clearest sign yet that the worst of Angola's troubles are over. But relief officials warn that some of Angola's biggest challenges may still lie ahead.

"People will discover their homes have been destroyed, roads are gone, schools are gone; very little is here," said Asfaha Bemnet, the United Nations official charged with overseeing the repatriation effort in M'banza Congo, about 200 miles northeast of Luanda, the capital. "What we are telling the returnees is, 'Look, you are not returning to the land of milk and honey. But it is your home and it is good to go back. So roll up your sleeves, get to work and help rebuild your country.' "

There is much to do. Last month the United Nations began bringing home the 400,000 refugees who remained in Congo, Namibia and Zambia.

The repatriation, which is voluntary, is a slow and complex process, impeded by bad roads, broken bridges and thousands of land mines.

The refugees return to a country where, according to the United Nations, 80 percent of people have no access to basic medical care. More than two-thirds have no running water.

A whole generation of children has never opened a schoolbook. Life expectancy is less than 40 years. Three in ten children will die before reaching their fifth birthday.

In this fertile land where fields have lain fallow because of land mines sown liberally across the countryside, more than a million people need help from the World Food Program to avoid starvation. In the fighting, roads and bridges across the country were destroyed, stranding millions of people in isolated towns and villages.

Beyond the war's terrible physical toll, those who return face a country whose social fabric and national identity, not yet fully formed when the war broke out between rival liberation factions just after the Portuguese colonists departed Angola in 1975, are in tatters.

Last month rebels in the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, or Unita, who have laid down their weapons, completed the transformation from guerrilla army to political party. They elected a leader to replace the charismatic but brutal Jonas Savimbi, whose death last year marked the end of their war with the quasi-Marxist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, or M.P.L.A., which rules the country.

But Angola remains a long way from having a fully functioning political system. The country has held only one election, in 1992, and government officials say 2005 is the earliest date possible for new elections.

"What we have in Angola now is negative peace," said Raphael Marques, a 31-year-old journalist and dissident who is the director of the Open Society Institute's Angolan office. "It is the absence of conflict, yes. But it is peace without justice, peace without opportunity, peace without democracy. This is not a peace that promises much to the Angolan people."

In the meantime, the Angolan government, led by President José Eduardo dos Santos, has vowed to use Angola's wealth of resources — mostly raw material that fueled the war — to tackle these problems.

It announced last month that foreign oil companies planned to invest billions to increase production. By 2020, Angola, the ninth ranking supplier to the United States, could triple its oil output to more than three million barrels a day.

The country also has diamonds, iron ore, phosphates, feldspar, bauxite, uranium and gold.

Few Angolans share in these riches. Foreign companies pay huge fees to the government to take the nation's wealth away, but little of it trickles down.

"The role of the state should be to take that wealth and apply it in ways that will benefit the people of Angola," said Justino Pinto de Andrade, head of the department of economics at the Catholic University of Angola in Luanda. "The oil revenues go straight to the state budget, but the people see very little benefit."

International groups that monitor how governments use the money they get from selling their natural resources accuse the Angolan government of mass corruption.

One British organization, Global Witness, investigated the country's finances and found at least \$1 billion worth of revenues a year simply unaccounted for — a sum that is a quarter of the nation's income.

Last year an internal report by the International Monetary Fund on Angola's finances reached a similar conclusion. Angola has not been able to qualify for low-cost loans from the I.M.F. to help in the rebuilding effort. Instead the government has borrowed money from private banks at high interest rates, using its oil as collateral.

Last month, in a speech to an oil industry conference in London, Angola's deputy prime minister acknowledged that the government had failed to account for all of the money it received from oil companies, and said Angola was committed to reporting honestly on its revenues and cracking down on corruption.

But the government declined to sign on to a voluntary initiative created by Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain that would require the country to report the payments it receives from oil and mining companies.

In an interview in Luanda, the M.P.L.A. party spokesman, Norberto dos Santos, who is not related to the president, said the government was committed to helping the Angolan people and making sure everyone benefited from the country's wealth.

"We want prosperity for all of the Angolan people," Mr. dos Santos said. "The government is committed to providing jobs and other assistance. But these things take time."

For people like the Antonio family who arrive home with nothing but dreams of a better future, the central government is a distant force with little connection to their daily struggle for survival.

"I am just a farmer," Mr. Antonio said when asked his opinion of the Angolan government as the family arrived at the transfer station the United Nations set up to handle incoming refugees on the outskirts of M'banza Congo. "I don't know about politics and I don't care. I only worry about my family."

At a temporary camp here, the Antonio family stood in line to collect the tools relief agencies offered to help them build a new life: two pieces of plastic sheeting for shelter, a set of pots and pans, five blankets, eight bars of soap, three collapsible jerry cans and two buckets.

The next day they collected two bags of maize meal, a sack of dry kidney beans, a few cups of salt and a couple of gallons of oil from the World Food Program. The United

Nations High Commission for Refugees runs the camp with help from several other aid organizations.

Mr. Antonio listened as workers from Handicap International, an antimine group, gave instructions on how to spot mines and bombs. Workers from another aid group gave his screaming children vaccinations to prevent diphtheria and measles.

The only representative of the Angolan government was a man from the Ministry of Social Welfare, which is ostensibly in charge of resettling displaced people, who strolled through camp barking patriotic encouragement to the refugees through a bullhorn.

"You are no longer refugees," the man said. "You are Angolans."

The Antonio family's story is typically Angolan. On Jan. 26, 1999, a bomb fell on their mud-brick house as rebel forces battled the army for control of M'banza Congo, the capital of the northern province of Zaire and a strategic point along the way to the large oil wells on the coast.

Everyone got out of the house safely, but the family lost everything. Mr. Antonio said he did not know which side shelled his house, and he said he did not care. The family walked to the Congolese border with nothing but their clothes and tattered shoes. For three harrowing days, with no food and little water, two daughters and two sons in tow, one just a baby, they walked through a war zone to the border.

In Congo, the Antonios assembled a simple but relatively comfortable life. Mr. Antonio built a hut with sticks and mud so his wife and children would not have to sleep in a crowded tent. When food ran short, he started farming in a small plot in the camp. Life in the camp was not so bad — his children went to school and his eldest son, Álvaro, learned how to be a mechanic. The family received free basic medical care.

"Life in Congo was good," Álvaro, who is now 18, said. "I had friends there, and we would play football and go to school together."

Álvaro, now finished with school, hopes to find work in M'banza Congo.

"I don't want to work the land," Álvaro said. "I have seen my father do it and the work is too hard and the money too little. I want to have a job."

But his chances of finding work in his hometown are slim. The war transformed M'banza Congo, once a thriving provincial capital, into a decrepit and lifeless place.

Half-destroyed colonial-era buildings line its main strip, the terra cotta roof tiles blown away, and listless young men stand idle in the streets. There are few jobs here; most people rely on handouts from aid agencies and subsistence farming to survive.

There is no running water in most homes, and the electricity works only in the center of town, and then usually for only a few hours after twilight each day. Malaria and typhoid are rampant, and few people can afford to visit the newly renovated hospital, one bright spot in town.

Though rich oil reserves lie just off the province's shores, about 120 miles away, gasoline is hard to come by. The pumps at the gas station on the town's main street have been dry for years.

Still, Mr. Antonio surveys his hometown with a kernel of hope. The morning after the family arrived, a truck waited to take them home, to Ms. Merneza's parents' house, a two-room mud-brick dwelling.

The children, led by 12-year-old Maria, lugged the family's possessions onto the truck — four bristly piglets, some tattered clothes, a couple of rough-hewn wooden benches and a radio, the same one that brought them news that the war was over.

"Life in Angola will be hard," Mr. Antonio said. "But as long as we have peace, we can survive anything."

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