

The Deadly Legacy of Landmines in Angola

Scars from a forgotten war

By [Giles Duley](#)

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Featured image: Minga, Moxico province. Dec 2017

Over its 27-year duration, the [US sponsored] Angolan war led to the death of an estimated two million people – making it one of the deadliest of the 20th century. But nearly two decades later, its violent legacy is still haunting the region.

Minga was excited by her new toy. She had been walking back to the cassava field with her grandmother when she remembered she'd left her plate where earlier they'd stopped for lunch. She turned and ran back, but the plate wasn't where she left it. She stooped down and began looking amongst the reeds and wildflowers that grew by the bridge. That's when she discovered the toy.

At dawn that same morning, when they'd left the village, her grandmother had told her not to come. "You worked all day yesterday, and you must be tired," she'd said. But Minga, despite being just six years old, was already a headstrong young girl, and she went with her anyway.

And now she was glad she had, because of her discovery. Minga had never owned a toy. In her village, children often made do with sticks or broken wheels – but this was something different. It was green, metal and shaped like a small tin. She wanted to show her brothers and sisters, so she picked it up to take home.

As she did, she noticed on one side there was a clump of dirt. She tried to clean it off with a stick, but the mud was caked like concrete by the relentless sun. Looking around, she saw a rock by the river, and hit the tin twice to knock it off. On the third strike, the toy exploded.

The detonation blinded Minga, and her left arm was severed at the elbow. It was June 2009.



Minga at her family home Moxico province. Dec 2017

Think of a major war in the last 50 years, and it's doubtful you'd think of Angola. In many ways, it's a forgotten war, yet it was one of the most violent and long lasting of the 20th century. By its end, in 2002, an estimated two million people had died.

Sparked by a fight for power between two independence movements following the end of Portuguese colonial control in 1975, the Angolan war, much like Vietnam, became a proxy fight in the far bigger global cold war. The two sides, the MLPA and UNITA, were supported by Cuban and South African troops respectively; with funds flooding into both sides from the

USSR and the USA.

It was a particularly brutal war, with civilian targeting, the use of child soldiers, and atrocities committed by both sides. Yet the world was happy to keep arming all factions of this oil and diamond-rich country. As late as 1989, George H W Bush had promised the rebel UNITA leader Savimbi “all appropriate and effective assistance.”

In fact, it was the death of Savimbi that was to effectively bring the war to an end. A near mythical figure, his charisma and power had been the core of UNITA. In 2002, he was injured in a fire-fight with Angolan government soldiers in Moxico province and died soon afterwards. Just six weeks after his death, a ceasefire was signed.

But peace did not bring stability and improved living for all. Visit Angola today and you find a still deeply divided society. While oil and diamonds have brought wealth to some, in many parts of the country, people live in poverty.

Moxico is Angola’s largest province, situated in the far east of the country, on the borders of Zambia and DC Congo. It covers an area the size of Great Britain, yet has a population smaller than Nottingham. During the civil war, it was often the centre of the guerrilla campaign, and as a result, much of the infrastructure was destroyed. Only recently were new roads built and the major bridges replaced.

For people living in Moxico, the civil war has cast a dark shadow – both economically, and over the thousands of refugees and internally displaced people who are still returning. But there is another deadly legacy that haunts the region 16 years after the war’s end: landmines.

It is estimated that 500,000 to more than one million landmines were laid during the civil war, with Moxico one of the most contaminated of all the provinces. It was one of these landmines that Minga had mistaken for a toy in 2009, and each year many more Angolans are killed or maimed by these hidden weapons.

Landmines are indiscriminate. Often they’re designed to maim, not kill: some are made to remove genitals, others to explode in the air spreading shrapnel. They can be filled with ball bearings, and are often made of plastic to avoid detection.

Despite the 1997 Ottawa Treaty banning their use and production, their ease of manufacture, the opening of stockpiles (for example in Libya) and the use of IEDs (improvised explosive devices) by terrorist groups and insurgents, has worryingly led to an increase in their use in recent years. But it is the legacy landmines that are the greatest challenge – countries such as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Colombia, Afghanistan are still contaminated by millions of landmines and UXO’s (unexploded ordinance) from past wars. In some of these countries, civilians are dying from landmines that were planted nearly 50 years ago.

Sadly it seems the longer ago the conflict, the harder it is to get the funding needed to deal with its legacy. It’s shocking to say, but when it comes to humanitarian aid and redevelopment, there are often trends – and countries getting the bulk of media interest tend to get the bulk of the funding. A country such as Angola, with its largely forgotten war, struggles to get the funding needed to deal with its legacy.



Sapalo in hospital. Luena. Dec 2017

It's not just landmines that pose a hidden threat. Angola is also littered with tens of thousands of UXOs from the war. Grenades, bullets, rockets, bombs – despite often being decades old and often buried under the surface – are as deadly as when they were first manufactured, as 14-year-old Sapalo discovered in an accident that was to change his life.

Sapalo was playing in his uncle's house when he saw a large rat dash across the room. He looked for something to hit it with, grabbing a lump of rusting metal that was sat on the table. He threw it at the rat.

A bright heat engulfed him, and Sapalo was thrown to the floor. Disorientated he tried to get up, but he couldn't. Unknown to him, that lump of metal he'd picked up had been the explosive warhead from an RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade). His uncle had found it when working in the fields that day, and brought it home in a plastic bag. He'd planned to get it identified, but had left it on the table. Its blast had destroyed both of Sapalo's legs. Later that day, they would be amputated just below the knee.

In Luena's central hospital, Sapalo struggled to deal with the pain. The hospital is desperately under-funded, even blood for a transfusion must be bought by the family. For Sapalo's father, it's a constant battle to find the money to keep his son alive.

Now, the future for Sapalo is bleak. Like most in the area, the family survives as subsistence farmers, they have little surplus from that to sell. Without support, Sapalo will struggle to attend school, and even if he manages to get a prosthesis, he won't be able to work in the fields. With Angola's economy struggling, the reality is that Sapalo will be left wheelchair-bound.



Sapalo's father washes him to try and keep his fever down. Luena. Dec 2017

At Luena's prosthetics centre – where, if the funds were available, Sapalo would be treated – the staff struggle to meet the huge demand. Each day they arrive promptly at 7am, arrange their scant remaining tools on the tired worktop, then sit and wait. The shelves that were once full of materials and newly made prostheses are bare, and what equipment they have left is held together by tape and the determination of the technicians. Few patients now visit the centre, and those that do are often turned away.

In 2012, the centre was making 150 prostheses a month. In 2017, that figure was zero. The reality is that they have no budget for materials, the wiring is unusable and what fabrication machines they had are long since broken. Many of the staff have not been paid for years – yet still, each day, they go to work and try to do as best they can.

A young man arrives with a prosthesis that has a large crack in the back. Jean Baptiste, the senior technician, holds the broken leg in his arms. For three years, he's received no salary, yet his dedication to his work is undiminished. But like all the staff, they are frustrated in not being able to use their skills.

The broken plastic leg is held in a vice, and empty drawers are searched until a soldering

iron is found. Using its heated point, Jean Baptiste tries to melt the plastic with the hot tip, to seal the crack. But the iron is broken and doesn't get hot enough to do the job. He rolls up its cord neatly and places it back in the drawer. Eventually, a hot air gun is borrowed, a metal screwdriver heated over an open flame and somehow the leg is fixed.

Watching these scenes, it's hard to feel positive that Angola's landmine legacy can ever be solved and that survivors will get the chance to live full lives. When it comes to fighting wars, it seems we have no problem funding them – at the height of the Angolan war funds, arms and direct military support flooded into the country from Cuba, South Africa, the United States and Russia – yet when it comes to cleaning up the legacy, the international community needs to do more.



Staff at the prosthetic limb-fitting center. Luena. Dec 2017



Staff at the prosthetic limb-fitting center. Luena. Dec 2017

But there is hope. Throughout the country, there are NGOs who have shown a dogged perseverance to clear the landmine legacy despite the challenges: organisations such as MAG (Mines Advisory Group), who have been operating in Moxico Province since 1994. In 2017, MAG gave back 56 million square metres of land to communities in the province, removing 1800 landmines and UXO items, and helping an estimated 90,000 people.

Mine clearance is a slow, dangerous and exacting job. The technology has hardly changed since the first metal detectors were used during World War Two. Essentially a field is split into grids, and then teams with metal detectors meticulously comb each square. Each piece of hidden scrap metal has to be treated as if it could be an unexploded bomb or landmine. In the fierce Angolan heat, keeping your focus and attention for such long tedious hours pushes the teams to their limit.

Watching mine clearance in progress brings home how slow and labour intensive the work is, but also illustrates that this issue is solvable. It simply comes down to funding – if the number of teams working could be multiplied, then Angola could become landmine free. But the opposite is happening: in the last 10 years, international funding for mine action in the region dropped by \$25.9 million. In the last decade, the funding has dropped by a staggering 90 per cent.

The goal is for all of Angola to be landmine-free by 2025, but at least \$34 million in funding is needed every year to make that happen. To clear Moxico province in that timescale, MAG needs \$8 million per year. But, without an increase in commitment from the international community, these goals are in doubt.



A metal door that was used as a stretcher to carry Jonas Savimbi the day he was killed in 2002. There are rumours that it is cursed, and so nobody has removed it.

Minga is a fiercely determined 15-year-old. Despite losing her sight, she tries to do everything as she did before the accident. Her week is spent in Luena, where she goes to

school, but she is happiest when she returns to the family's small village in the country. There she pounds cassava, helps to cook and still walks for an hour down to the bridge where she was injured, to wash her clothes in the river.

She hopes to one day become a teacher. Her dream is to help other children who've lost their sight like her, and to teach them to read braille – a skill that has changed her life. Her resilience is inspiring, but she should never have had to go through this. Resilience, an attribute born through suffering, is not a quality a young girl should have had to rely on.

Just a few miles from the bridge where Minga was injured, an old metal door rests against a tree. It's been there since 2002 – a relic from the day the UNITA leader Savimbi was killed, when the door used as a makeshift stretcher.

In many ways, this is the spot where the war ended – but in Angola, you see clearly how a war doesn't end when a peace treaty is signed. Its legacy is still leading to death and injury, and until the funding for mine clearance is increased, children like Minga and Sapalo will continue to pay a heavy price for a conflict that was supposedly over before they were even born.

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