ANGOLA CIVIL WAR:
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) declared Angola’s independence from Portugal and took power in 1975. Nevertheless, from the beginning there were hostilities with two other anti-colonial groups, UNITA and the National Front of the Liberation of Angola (FNLA). Forces operating in the country during the struggle included the ruling MPLA party, headed by President Jose Eduardo dos Santos; the FNLA; and the separatist Cabinda Enclave Liberation Front (FLEC).

According to Amnesty International, between the launching of the 1961 war for independence against the colonial Portuguese power and the end of the war in 2002, the country never experienced complete peace. Beginning with

ANGOLA
PRELIMINARY MISSION TO
KUITO, BIE PROVINCE

At the request of “The Provincial Commission of Exhumations of the Bodies Buried in the City of Kuito,” with the partnership and logistical support of the Christian Children’s Fund (CCF) and funding from the Open Society Institute, one member of EAAF, Anahí Ginarte and an external consultant invited by EAAF, Argentinean archaeologist Claudia Bisso, conducted a preliminary mission from May 30 to June 7, 2003 in the city of Kuito, capital of the province of Bie, Angola.
the anti-colonial struggle, the war became linked to Cold War politics and eventually was tied to the fighting throughout central Africa not only for political control but also for control of natural resources, particularly oil and diamonds.\(^1\)

Human rights groups reported that every group was responsible for human rights abuses, including mass killings, disappearances, illegal detentions, extra-judicial executions, torture, forced displacement, forced conscription, sexual enslavement and abuse, and others. According to Amnesty International, a lack of a sense of accountability by the government and UNITA persisted throughout the war, in which both parties avoided investigations of abuses and ignored calls to implement “corrective or preventive measures.”\(^2\)

Funded by sales of diamonds found in territories it controlled, UNITA had strong alliances with apartheid South Africa, the USA, the United Kingdom, and France, while the ruling MPLA was supported by the USSR and Cuba. Later in the conflict, the MPLA sold oil to finance its war effort.\(^3\) According to some who have studied the conflict, such as Alec Russell, “By the mid-Nineties what had been the archetypal Cold War conflict had become a clash of minerals — the oil of the MPLA against the diamonds of Savimbi [UNITA’s Leader].”\(^4\) In the 1990’s, Savimbi’s control of the north eastern part of Angola reportedly provided UNITA with an estimated $400-600 million a year to fuel the war.\(^5\)

The Alvor Accords, peace accords signed in 1989, collapsed in 1991 in little more than a year, re-igniting the fighting. In 1991, the government and UNITA signed the Bicesse Accords, a peace agreement brought about with support from the Soviet Union, United States and Portugal, which paved the way for UN-monitored elections.\(^6\) When UNITA lost the 1992 election, it rejected the results, claiming that they were unfair, and resumed the war. Some of the country’s worst human rights abuses, including mass killings, occurred during these years.\(^7\) Amnesty International reports, “The intensity of the fighting between October 1992, when war resumed, and February 1995, when the cease-fire negotiated at Lusaka came into force, was unprecedented.”\(^8\)

As a result of the rejection of the election by UNITA and resumption of fighting, The United Nations Security Council imposed an arms embargo along with petroleum sanctions on UNITA in 1993. In November 1994, according to Amnesty International, the government and UNITA supplemented the first accords with the Lusaka Protocol, which was supervised by The United Nations Angola Verification Mission (UNAVEM III).\(^9\) The new accords called for disarmament, demobilization, the release of political prisoners, the training of police on human rights issues, and the incorporation of former UNITA soldiers and leaders into the FAA (Angolan Armed Forces), the police, and other government posts at all levels, including more than 70 seats of the National Assembly.\(^10\) The protocol also established human rights monitoring mechanisms, and the UN established a Human Rights Unit within its political division. The accords called on Angolans to “forgive and forget the offenses resulting from the Angolan conflict and face the future with tolerance and confidence.”\(^11\) In addition, several broad amnesty laws passed beginning in 1991 prohibit prosecution for crimes related to the conflict.\(^12\)

Many viewed the signing of the Lusaka Protocol as stemming more from international pressure than from the political will of UNITA and the Angolan government to achieve peace. Even while initial negotiations were taking place in Lusaka, the two groups continued military operations with disastrous consequences for the civilian population, especially in Kuito, Huambo and Uige. The United Nations reported that UNITA refused to comply with the accords.\(^13\) After four years of attempting to implement the Lusaka Accords, in 1998, “full scale war returned…heaping further suffering on people who have already endured over 35 years of conflict.”\(^14\) Reasons for the resumption of fighting ranged from impunity for war crimes to the uneven implementation of the Lusaka Protocol, in particular with regard to UNITA’s failure to give up control over UNITA areas, and the government’s failure to disarm civilians.\(^15\) During that year, the war became increasingly linked to other wars in the region, exemplified by the August, 1998 movement of thousands of Angolan troops into the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in support of President Kabila, presumably to prevent UNITA from using the DRC as a base camp.\(^16\) (see
UNITA reportedly rearmed and regrouped through the illicit sale of diamonds and arms traders who disregarded sanctions.¹⁷

The UN responded to the renewed fighting with more sanctions, adopting two resolutions which prohibited countries from importing Angolan diamonds without a Certificate of Origin issued by the Government of Angola, and imposed further financial restrictions on UNITA.¹⁸

In 2002, after more than 35 years of war, in which 1.5 million Angolans died and more than 4 million people were internally displaced, National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) rebels in Angola surrendered after the death of their leader, Jonas Savimbi.¹⁹ The FAA and UNITA signed a memorandum of understanding that ended the fighting, and formally declared peace in August. The ceasefire and peace agreement brought to light a massive humanitarian crisis, in which an estimated 1.8 million people needed food assistance, more than 4 million people were internally displaced, and 85,000 demobilized UNITA soldiers and their 340,000 family members had become dependent on the government or international community.²⁰ Some human rights abuses continued to occur after the ceasefire, according to Human Rights Watch. There were reports of forced repatriation, restrictions were placed on freedom of movement by local government officials, and there were reports of extortion, harassment and violence against displaced persons, including rape of women.²¹

Following the war, the ICRC reported that 5,665 people requested their assistance in finding missing relatives. The ICRC expanded its tracing activities in 2002, and developed the Gazeta, a publication distributed throughout Angola and in the refugee camps across the border devoted to tracing missing relatives. It includes lists of the names of those reported missing and unaccompanied children.²²
CASE BACKGROUND: THE SIEGE OF KUITO

Kuito was under siege for 18 months between 1998 and 2000. Both government forces and UNITA fought for the control of the town, reportedly resulting in several thousands of civilians killed by both sides or by starvation.

According to local NGOs, the remains of victims were buried mostly at night in streets, barren lands, and in backyards around the city; others were left unburied. It was too dangerous to bury the dead in cemeteries at the time.

A multi-sector commission established in Kuito by the provincial government, the “Provincial Commission of Exhumations of the Bodies Buried in the City of Kuito” (Provincial Commission), was appointed to oversee the exhumations. The Provincial Commission is comprised of different entities from Kuito’s civil society, such as members of the Catholic Church, nurses, teachers, housewives, and representatives of the families of the victims. José Amaro Tati, the Governor of Bie Province, presides, and the minister of health also participates.

The principal objective of the Provincial Commission is the relocation of the remains of approximately 7,000 individuals that are now buried near houses, parks, and public buildings, so that they can be reburied in an appropriate place; most likely in a new cemetery that is being constructed outside of the city.

According to the Provincial Commission, 70% of the victims have been identified, given that they were buried by their own relatives during the siege. In these cases the Commission highlighted the necessity of laboratory analysis to determine the identity of the victims.

THE WORK OF EAAF

At the request of “The Provincial Commission of Exhumations of the Bodies Buried in the City of Kuito,” with the partnership and logistical support of the Christian Children’s Fund (CCF), EAAF members met with members of the Provincial Commission and with the Governor of Bie Province. They also participated in the weekly meeting of the United Nations and NGO’s working in and around Kuito to exchange information and coordinate activities.

During the meetings held by the Provincial Commission, representatives explained the objectives of their project:

- To have local health workers exhume 7,000 bodies in two six month periods by completing 40 exhumations a day.
• To return the remains to the families so they can observe funeral rites according to their culture and religion.
• To rebury the remains in a new cemetery constructed for the victims of the conflict.

EAAF made several presentations about the work methodology that could be used during exhumations, highlighting the importance of the preliminary investigation of each case before beginning exhumations and the significance of conducting precise field work and laboratory analysis.

While to date there has not been a comprehensive investigation of what happened in Kuito during the “siege”, the work of the Provincial Commission can provide useful data for the reconstruction of the facts in historical context, and can help if the communities and government decide to further investigate in the future.

While EAAF members understood the main objectives of the Provincial Commission were to give victims a proper grave in cases in which their identity is known, or to identify the victim in cases in which the identity is unknown, they also underscored the importance of trying to determine the cause of death for each individual.

The EAAF also explained the importance of archiving the different sources of information:

• Photos and videos of the location of the graves
• Photos and videos of the damage to the buildings during the bombings in the siege before they are reconstructed
• Written and oral (recorded) testimonies from the survivors
• Database with the names and personal data of those killed and wounded during the siege for information analysis

After various meetings, the EAAF and the Provincial Commission agreed to arrange a second EAAF mission to collaborate on the exhumations. The key objectives of the second mission will be:

• To collaborate in the exhumations and in the analysis of the human remains buried in the city of Kuito.
• To train a local team in forensic archaeology techniques.
• To collaborate in the documentation and archiving of the work completed.

Update: The Provincial Commission started exhumations in Kuito during 2004. EAAF was unable to return because of lack of funding in 2004 but may be able to do so in 2005.

ENDNOTES
21. Ibid.