REFUGEE RETURN TO WAR-DEVASTATED ANGOLA
Refugee Return to War-Destastated Angola
U.S. Committee for Refugees
Findings and Recommendations
By Joel Frushone, Africa Policy Analyst

Refugees repatriating to Angola are returning to a skeleton of a country. Nearly 30 years of brutal civil war reduced most of Angola's homes, schools, hospitals, places of worship, markets, roads, bridges, and commercial and government buildings to rubble. The war also rendered useless hundreds of thousands of acres of fertile agricultural land and countless miles of fish-abundant rivers with millions of landmines and unexploded ordnance, nearly all of which remain in place today.

The war's human toll was equally horrific.

An estimated 500,000 to 1 million Angolans died of war-related causes, including deliberate civilian murders, malnutrition, and otherwise preventable diseases. Twenty-seven years of fighting for political control of the country and its lucrative natural resources of oil and diamonds between rebels known as the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and government forces drove 4.5 million Angolans—or four out of every ten—from their homes, including approximately 500,000 who fled to neighboring countries.

Angola's civil war came to a dramatic and abrupt end when UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi was killed in battle in February 2002. UNITA and the Angolan government agreed to a cease-fire in April and signed a comprehensive peace agreement in August, bringing Angola's 27 years of warfare to an official end.

The war's end triggered the spontaneous and abrupt return home of an estimated 800,000 internally displaced Angolans and some 80,000 Angolan refugees.

In June 2003, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) launched the Angolan Organized Voluntary Repatriation Program to assist with the return of tens of thousands of Angolan refugees living in neighboring Zambia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Namibia. After assisting more than 40,000 Angolan refugees return to their areas of origin, UNHCR temporarily suspended refugee repatriation because of the onset of seasonal rains in mid-November 2003.

The U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) conducted an extensive three-week site visit to Zambia and Angola during November 2003 to examine the repatriation and reintegration of Angolan refugees. As UNHCR pauses after phase one of the repatriation program—the agency plans to resume facilitating refugee return in April 2004—USCR offers timely findings and recommendations on the challenges Angolan refugee returnees face as they attempt to restart their lives in their currently peaceful, but war-devastated homeland.

I. Findings

ANGOLA

Protection:

Returnees

1. Refugee repatriation to Angola is a delicate process that could happen at a faster pace, but would endanger the lives of repatriating Angolans if rushed. An estimated 200,000 Angolans have repatriated since the end of conflict in mid-2002. The majority of the approximately 300,000 Angolan refugees remaining in neighboring countries wish to
return home. Angola's limited absorption capacity, primarily because of the presence of landmines and lack of social services, is preventing more refugees from repatriating.

2. Three distinct categories of refugees repatriated to Angola during 2003:
   - Refugees who repatriated as part of UNHCR’s voluntary organized return operation.
   - Refugees who spontaneously repatriated and received UNHCR assistance once in Angola.
   - Refugees who repatriated spontaneously, primarily to areas with no international humanitarian presence, and received no assistance from UNHCR.

3. Nearly 95,000 Angolan refugees returned to Angola during the first phase of the UNHCR voluntary organized repatriation program—from June to November 2003. During phase one, UNHCR assisted more than 42,000 Angolan refugees repatriate to their areas of origin, providing transportation and reintegration assistance to more than 20,000 Angolan refugees living in the DRC, some 18,000 living in Zambia, and 4,000 living in Namibia. During the same six months, approximately another 50,000 Angolan refugees repatriated spontaneously, including some 25,000 who received UNHCR transportation and reintegration assistance once in Angola and some 25,000 who received no assistance.

4. Spontaneously repatriating refugees who do not receive reintegration assistance are at a greater disadvantage upon their return to Angola than refugees who receive UNHCR support.

Obstacles to Return

5. Refugees repatriating to Angola—and UNHCR and other UN agencies and international humanitarian organizations assisting with their return—face three major obstacles:
   - The presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance.
   - Lack of basic social services in areas of refugee return.
   - Poor infrastructure.

6. The presence of landmines, broken bridges, and poor road conditions have rendered closed approximately 40 percent of the main refugee returnee areas in Angola to organized refugee repatriation and have slowed repatriation and reintegration to areas deemed safe for refugee return by the UN Security Coordinator (UNSECOORD).

Landmines

7. According to experts, Angola was a testing ground for landmines produced throughout the world during the past 50 years and remains one of the mostly heavily mined countries in the world. The variety of mines and unexploded ordnance in Angola complicates the already intricate job of international mine detection and removal organizations working in refugee returnee areas, primarily the UK-based Mine Advisory Group (MAG).

8. MAG, UN agencies, and international humanitarian assistance organizations have so far reported very few landmine accidents. As greater numbers of Angolans repatriate,
landmine accidents are likely to increase in refugee returnee and other areas during 2004.

9. Lack of funding and cooperation from the government of Angola has slowed the detection and removal of landmines and unexploded ordnance. At the same time, the government of Angola continues to pressure mine-detection organizations to clear more landmine-contaminated areas faster.

Lack of Social Services

10. Nearly every refugee returnee area in Angola lacks basic social services, including potable sources of drinking water, latrines, primary schools, and health clinics. Refugee returnee areas also lack education and health care materials and equipment, including drugs and the ability to properly store them.

11. Refugee returnee areas lack governmental technical reconstruction experts, professionally trained Angolan teachers, doctors, nurses, and other civil servants. In many refugee returnee areas, the government of Angola has not paid civil servants for 18 months.

12. During 2003, the majority of Angolan refugees repatriated to Moxico Province, eastern Angola, and Zaire Province, western Angola. UNHCR, in partnership with international humanitarian assistance organizations, is gradually reintroducing very basic social services in major returnee areas in Moxico and Zaire Provinces. UNHCR expects that during 2004, the majority of refugees will also repatriate to Moxico and Zaire Provinces. UNHCR and international humanitarian assistance organizations are limited in the scope and size of the social services they can provide repatriated refugees in Moxico and Zaire Provinces, and other current and prospective returnee areas.

Poor Infrastructure

13. Nearly three decades of warfare completely destroyed Angola’s roads, bridges, and airstrips, and reduced most of the country’s homes, schools, hospitals, places of worship, and markets to rubble.

14. Once inside Angola, UNHCR-repatriation convoys often take several hours to traverse 60 miles (100 km). The considerable length of time repatriating refugees spend traveling to their areas of origin is physically and mentally stressful on returnees. Traveling and transporting humanitarian assistance supplies to refugee returnee areas is extremely timely and costly for UNHCR, UN agencies, and international humanitarian organizations.

15. With negligible help from the government of Angola, UNHCR, UN agencies, and international humanitarian organizations are beginning to rehabilitate or completely rebuild the majority of Angola’s infrastructure in refugee returnee areas.

UNHCR

16. Amidst extraordinarily challenging circumstances and difficult working conditions, UNHCR/Angola is doing a commendable job with refugee repatriation. UNHCR/Angola overcame myriad security, logistical, and other obstacles to assist approximately 10,000 refugees repatriate per month during June to November 2003.
17. Despite that their budget was reduced by nearly 50 percent from 2003, UNHCR/Angola plans to assist twice as many refugees repatriate during 2004.

18. UNHCR/Angola currently lacks the protection officers needed to adequately monitor the reintegration of refugee returnees. UNHCR/Angola made the safe arrival of refugee returnees to their areas of origin a top priority during 2003 and dedicated financial and human resources accordingly. Because of a reduced 2004 budget and their plans to assist twice as many refugees return home next year, UNHCR/Angola will likely struggle to properly monitor the reintegration of repatriated refugees during 2004.

Humanitarian Assistance:

The Government of Angola

19. Refugee reintegration and related reconstruction tasks before the government of Angola are daunting, but, if adequately and responsibly addressed, manageable.

20. The government of Angola has yet to take earnest steps to fully understand the basic social, humanitarian, and development needs in refugee returnee areas and is extremely under prepared to assist repatriating refugees as they strive to reintegrate.

21. Repatriated refugees expect the government of Angola to take the lead in rehabilitating or newly constructing schools, health clinics, and water stations. Repatriated refugees also expect the government to provide and pay teachers, health care workers, and other civil servants in returnee areas. To date, the government of Angola has provided insignificant reintegration assistance in refugee returnee areas.

22. Most refugees who repatriated on UNHCR-convoys received UNHCR-issued Voluntary Repatriation Forms (VRF's), which, in most cases, are the only identification returnees possess. Most refugees who have spontaneously repatriated do not possess VRF's. The government of Angola has stated they will recognize VRF's as temporary proof of Angolan citizenship, but, at the detriment to returnees, is slow to put the promise into practice.

23. The government of Angola has failed to issue critically needed identification documents to repatriated refugees, denying many returnees citizenship and other rights enjoyed by Angolan civilians. Refugee returnees without government-recognized identification and, in many cases, returnees with VRF’s, are often harassed by military and police officials, and are unable to legally compete for limited jobs, enroll in schools, obtain passports, open bank accounts, and carry out other similar tasks necessary to successfully reintegrate into Angolan society.

24. The government of Angola's lack of interest, participation, and financial support to ensure that more refugee returnee areas are safe and that basic social services are restored has severely restricted repatriation. If this trend continues international interest and support for refugee repatriation and reintegration to Angola is certain to quickly wane, which could derail the short- and long-term prospects for the safe and dignified durable repatriation of Southern Africa's longest standing refugee population.
Oil Revenue

25. Angola is sub-Saharan Africa’s second largest producer of oil, extracting nearly 1 million barrels of oil per day, is the seventh largest importer of oil to the United States, providing approximately 25 percent of its annual production to the United States, and ranks third in the world in new oil discoveries. Angola’s massive oil revenue provides the government of Angola an estimated $3 to $5 billion annually, but remains concentrated in the hands of some 100 families in the inner circle of Angolan president José Eduardo dos Santos, and the Angola Central Bank, Ministry of Finance, and Sonangol, Angola’s state oil company.

26. Despite its tremendous current and projected wealth from the country’s oil reserves, the government of Angola has invested inconsequential amounts, if any, of the country’s money to reconstruct and develop refugee returnee areas and other desperately deprived regions of Angola.

Foreign Investment

27. Profit realized by foreign companies extracting oil from Angola’s primarily off-shore reserves, including ExxonMobil, ChevronTexaco, Royal Dutch/Shell, British Petroleum, TotalFinaElf, and others, remains largely unknown. While most oil companies operating in Angola annually invest billions of dollars in their extraction operations, in comparison, minuscule amounts of profit are in turn invested in social service and development projects in Angola.

28. The opportunity for Angola to attract international donor support for refugee reintegration and reconstruction projects in returnee areas will likely evaporate by late 2004. Potential large-scale refugee return to other African countries, primarily Sudan and the DRC, during 2004 will overshadow and detract financial and human resources needed for refugee repatriation to Angola. The oil-revenue-rich government of Angola’s reluctance to invest in refugee repatriation projects is also likely to turn potential international donor nations to refugee reintegration programs in other countries.

Reintegration

29. Refugee returnee communities are relying solely on UNHCR, the World Food Program (WFP), other UN agencies, and international humanitarian organizations for reintegration assistance and will more than likely continue to for the foreseeable future. If international humanitarian assistance agencies were not present, repatriating refugees—many of who have lived outside of Angola for decades—would receive no reintegration assistance.

30. Most refugees returned to Angola in relatively good health. Returnees are subsisting on WFP food rations—provided as part of UNHCR’s organized refugee repatriation package—meat from wild animals locally hunted and purchased, fish caught in Angola’s many rivers and streams that course through or near returnee areas, and mangos and other locally grown fruit.
31. The presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance has hindered returnees' access to arable land and has significantly reduced agriculture production in returnee areas and is limiting the opportunities for returnees—nearly all of who are subsistence farmers—to obtain a minimum level of self-sufficiency. The presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance near areas where refugee returnees are reintegrating have turned water and firewood collection, cultivating, fishing, and other similar routine daily chores into life-risking activities in Angola.

32. Not all UNHCR refugee repatriation packages included agriculture tools and seeds, which the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) agreed to provide. Repatriated refugees highly desire seedlings, particularly cassava. Repatriation packages did not include seedlings.

33. Refugee reintegration projects implemented by some of UNHCR's partners, particularly in Zaire Province, are substandard.

**Delivery of Aid**

34. Angola's deteriorated roads, broken bridges, and flooded rivers—important factors to consider when transporting returnees, their belongings, and international humanitarian assistance personnel and materials—have encumbered and slowed repatriation. WFP humanitarian assistance flights are critical, in part, to overcoming these obstacles. UNHCR and international humanitarian agencies rely on WFP flights for a multitude of reasons. Lack of international donor response has forced WFP to reduce many air services, which has hindered repatriation and reintegration projects.

35. In late 2003, funding shortages forced WFP to restrict cargo flights to carrying food only. According to UN estimates, it costs WFP approximately $15,000.00 to fly a cargo plane from Luanda, the capital, to various provincial capital cities in Angola. Other financially strapped UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations increasingly do not have the funds to cover the cost of flying much needed construction materials, vehicles, fuel, and other related supplies to returnee areas, most of which are remote and accessible only by air or poor roads made impassable during heavy seasonal rains.

36. WFP funding shortages and the reduced frequency of WFP flights to returnee areas have brought the implementation of UNHCR's Quick Impact Projects (QIP's)—primarily refugee reintegration projects that require construction material for hand-dug water wells, schools, and clinics—to a halt. A reduction in WFP flights has also delayed the pre-positioning and distribution of food and non-food items intended for repatriating refugees.

**ZAMBIA**

**Protection:**

**Expected Returnees**

37. Currently, some 90,000 Angolans remain in three refugee settlements, Mayukwayukwa, Meheba, and Nangweshi, in Western Zambia, where they receive protection and humanitarian assistance from UNHCR/Zambia. An additional estimated 150,000 Angolan refugees live outside Mayukwayukwa, Meheba, and Nangweshi refugee
settlements and in urban areas among the Zambian population. Angolan refugees living outside of government-designated refugee areas in Zambia are not recognized as official refugees and do not receive humanitarian assistance from UNHCR.

**Refugees Unwilling to Return**

38. As many as 30,000 to 50,000 Angolan refugees have no desire to live in Angola and will choose to remain in Zambia rather than repatriate. Angolan refugees unwilling and unlikely to repatriate include:

- Young adults and children born and raised in Zambia, many of whom have never visited Angola and are unfamiliar with their homeland.
- Children enrolled in school.
- Former UNITA supporters and combatants, primarily refugees who reside in and around Nangweshi refugee settlement and other areas of Western Zambia.
- Adult refugees who cite political problems in Angola and are not fully convinced that peace will hold.

39. The government of Zambia recognizes that thousands of Angolan refugees will choose to remain in Zambia and is considering amending the Constitution of Zambia, the Refugees Control Act, and other Zambian laws to create a legal framework so that Angolan refugees unwilling to move to Angola will have the opportunity to apply for Zambian citizenship. The government of Zambia will need financial and other support to help nationalize and properly integrate Angolan refugees who might seek Zambian citizenship.

**International Resettlement**

40. UNHCR/Zambia and the government of Zambia are actively pursuing two durable solutions—repatriation and local integration—for Angolan refugees residing in Zambia. There are approximately 300 or more Angolan refugees residing in Zambia who might warrant international resettlement. UNHCR/Zambia plans to conduct a survey during 2004 to obtain more information regarding possible resettlement candidates.

**Landmine Risk Education**

41. UNHCR/Zambia and the Association for Aid and Relief (AAR), a Japan-based non-governmental organization, are providing critical landmine risk education to Angolans preparing to repatriate from government-designated refugee settlements in Zambia. Angolan refugees who live outside of government-designated refugee areas in Zambia and are preparing to repatriate do not receive landmine-risk education from UNHCR, AAR, or any other organization.

42. Angolan refugees who spontaneously repatriate with no transportation assistance from UNHCR or the international humanitarian community return home at considerable personal risk. UNHCR/Zambia and the government of Zambia are aware of the dangers spontaneously repatriating refugees face and are likely to continue to encounter during the long and arduous journey home but appropriately do not impede their return.
Humanitarian Assistance:

Self-Sufficiency

43. Most Angolan refugees reached a remarkable level of self-sufficiency and did not become dependant on the international community during asylum in Zambia. After three years of residency in Mayukwayukwa and Meheba refugee settlements, refugees no longer receive WFP monthly food rations, excluding refugees deemed vulnerable by UNHCR, primarily the elderly, orphans, and single mothers. Local Zambian officials empowered Angolan refugees by providing them with 6 to 12 acres (2.5 to 5 hectares) of fertile land for agriculture purposes upon arrival to Zambia. This generosity enabled refugees to supplement their diets and to eventually amply feed themselves.

44. Most Angolans living in refugee settlements in Western Zambia were productive and successful subsistence farmers. If repatriating and repatriated refugees receive adequate initial agriculture assistance upon their return and reintegration to Angola they are likely to become food self-sufficient within several successful harvests.

Refugees Contribution

45. With the repatriation of the Angolan refugee population, Zambia has already lost and will continue to lose a tremendous source of agricultural labor and production. Corn produced by Angolan refugees living in Western Zambia is a highly desirable commodity sold throughout Zambia and was a source of steady income for the Angolan refugee population. Sweet potatoes produced by Angolan refugees are prized and exported throughout Southern Africa.

46. The Zambia Initiative has made a modest noticeable contribution to poverty reduction in refugee host areas in Western Zambia, which is the poorest region of the country and hosts more than 75 percent of the refugee population in Zambia. Designed to provide development assistance identified as vital by refugee host communities and refugees, Zambia Initiative projects—which include new classroom and school construction, agro-forestry, agriculture, grain storage, and hand-dug water wells—have the potential to substantially alleviate poverty in pockets of Western Zambia if properly funded.

The Government of Zambia

47. The government of Zambia and citizens and local officials in Western Zambia have graciously hosted and thoughtfully assisted Angolan refugees for several decades. The government of Zambia and local officials in Western Zambia have also actively participated, supported, and accommodated UNHCR during the Angolan Organized Voluntary Repatriation Program.
II. Recommendations

To the Angolan government:

1. The government of Angola should make refugee repatriation and reintegration a national priority and assume a larger leadership role to ensure that more returnee areas are safe and replete with basic social services.

2. The Angolan Ministry for Social Assistance and Reinsertion, in close collaboration with UNHCR and the UN Development Program (UNDP), should conduct extensive social, humanitarian, and development needs assessments in current and prospective refugee returnee areas.

3. The government of Angola should immediately make direct and substantial financial contributions from its vast oil and diamond revenue to refugee repatriation, reintegration, and development projects UNHCR, WFP, other UN agencies, and international humanitarian organizations are implementing in refugee returnee areas.

4. The government of Angola should work in concert with international mine detection and removal organizations and directly fund their work in refugee returnee and other heavily contaminated areas of the country.

5. The government of Angola should verify the nationality of returnees and promptly issue birth certificates, or the national equivalent, to all refugee returnee children, and identification documents to all refugee returnee adults free of charge.

6. The government of Angola should allow UNHCR, other UN agencies, and international humanitarian organizations to transport refugee repatriation related materials and personnel into Angola free of customs and immigration charges for the duration of UNHCR's Angolan Organized Voluntary Repatriation Program.

To UNHCR:

7. UNHCR/Geneva should expand its protection staff in Angola to bolster the monitoring of repatriated refugees.

8. UNHCR/Zambia should expand the information campaign component of UNHCR's Angolan Organized Voluntary Repatriation Program to include Angolan refugee populations living outside of government-designated refugee areas in Western Zambia.

9. UNHCR/Geneva, in close collaboration with UNHCR/Zambia, should actively promote and aggressively pursue funding from donor nations, including the government of Angola, for the Zambia Initiative.

10. UNHCR should consider airlifting refugees to areas of return in Angola.

11. UNHCR/Angola should study the merits of operating its own passenger and cargo air services in Angola.

12. UNHCR/Angola should consider employing a revolving field assistant, perhaps a UN Volunteer, to improve communication and assistance between Luanda, the capital, and UNHCR offices throughout the country.
To the U.S. government:

13. The U.S. government should strongly urge the government of Angola to assume greater financial responsibility and invest oil and diamond revenue in refugee reintegration and development projects to help ensure that the repatriation of Angola refugees is durable.

14. The U.S. government should strongly urge U.S. oil and diamond companies working in Angola to invest substantially in social and development programs in refugee return areas and other areas of the country.

15. The U.S. government should financially support the deployment of more protection officers—particularly those deployed through a joint initiative between the International Rescue Committee and UNHCR—to refugee returnee areas in Angola.

16. The U.S. government should encourage and support the government of Zambia to create the legal framework necessary so that Angolan refugees unwilling to repatriate are able to apply for Zambian citizenship.

17. USAID/Zambia should work in close collaboration with the government of Zambia to ensure that the Zambia Initiative continues well after the Angolan Organized Voluntary Repatriation Program concludes.

To other UN agencies:

18. UNSECOORD should conduct more security assessments in current and potential refugee return areas and should work more cohesively with other UN agencies and mine detection and removal organizations.

19. FAO should provide all repatriated refugees receive with agriculture tools, seeds, and cassava and other seedlings to transplant. FAO should ensure that future refugee repatriation packages contain adequate agriculture tools, seeds, and cassava and other seedlings to transplant. FAO should also provide fishing nets, hooks, and lines to refugees repatriating to traditional fishing areas.

20. WFP should resume full humanitarian community air services, including pre-positioning food and non-food items for refugee repatriation packages, construction materials for UNHCR QIP's and other development projects, and fuel.

21. UNDP should expand its work in Angola to include more development projects in refugee returnee areas and neighboring communities.

To international donors:

22. International donor nations should vigorously urge the government of Angola to invest reasonable amounts of the country’s vast oil and diamond revenue in repatriation, reintegration, social services, and reconstruction projects in refugee returnee areas. International donor nations should also consider creating an internationally operated development fund for Angola, using Angola’s oil and diamond revenue as a primary source of funding.
23. International donors should urge oil and diamond companies working in Angola to invest substantially in social and development programs in refugee return areas and other areas of the country.

24. International donor nations should consider directly funding international humanitarian organizations implementing reintegration and reconstruction projects in refugee returnee areas.

25. International donors should fully fund WFP's humanitarian passenger and cargo air services, and WFP's return and resettlement food assistance operations in Angola.

26. International donors, particularly the European Union, should provide financial support for the deployment of more Protection Surge Capacity Project officers to refugee returnee areas in Angola.

27. International donors should encourage the continuation of the Zambia Initiative through substantial financial and other support to ensure the program's longevity.

28. International donor nations should provide technical, financial, and other support to help the government of Zambia nationalize and properly integrate Angolan refugees who might seek Zambian citizenship.

To the Zambian government

29. Zambian governmental officials at the highest levels, including President Levy Mwanawasa, should actively pursue international donor support for the Zambia Initiative.

30. The Zambian parliament should strive to amend the Constitution of Zambia and Zambia's relevant refugee laws to create a legal framework so that Angolan refugees unwilling to move to Angola can apply for Zambian citizenship. Zambian President Mwanawasa should support such a framework.

To oil and diamond companies operating in Angola:

31. Oil and diamond companies operating in Angola should invest substantially in social and development programs in refugee return areas and other areas of the country.

32. Oil and diamond companies operating in Angola should strongly urge the government of Angola to invest reasonable amounts of oil and diamond revenue—that they help the government earn—in repatriation, reintegration, social services, and reconstruction projects in refugee returnee areas.

For more information, please contact Joel Frushone @ 202-347-3507 or ifrushone@irsu-uscr.org

The U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) is a public information and advocacy program of Immigration and Refugee Services of America (IRSA), a nongovernmental, non-profit organization. Since 1958, USCR has been defending the rights of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons worldwide.