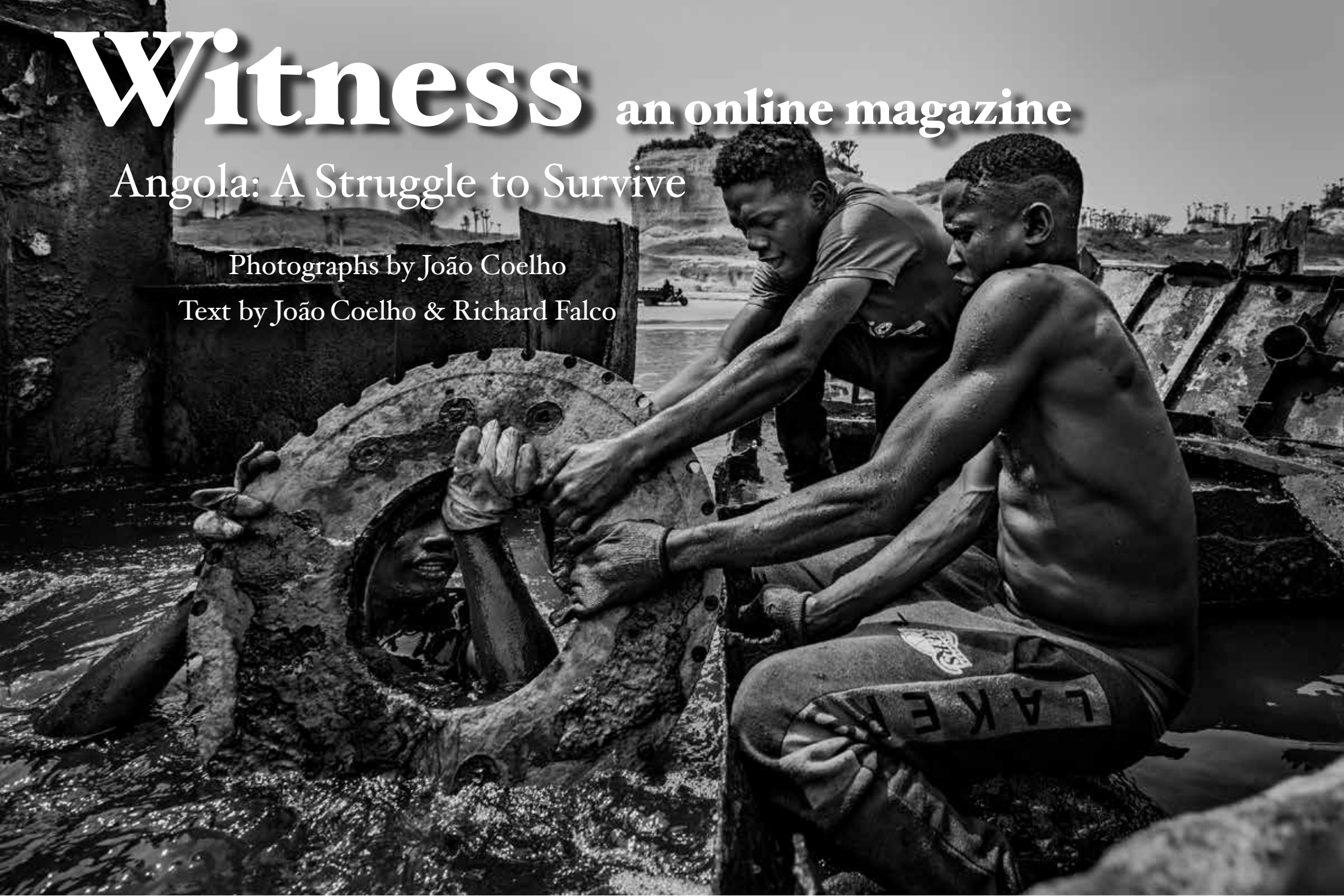


Witness an online magazine

Angola: A Struggle to Survive

Photographs by João Coelho

Text by João Coelho & Richard Falco



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The Men and the Sea

It could be a beach like any other, but this one seems to be haunted as dozens of iron skeletons lie there. It's a ship graveyard. Giants corroded by the wind and sea salt peter rest asleep in the shallows of this beach that stretches for more than two kilometers. It looks like the setting of a post-apocalyptic movie where the sea waters have receded and left all the ships lying on the ocean floor.

There's a sense of desolation and sadness in the air as you admire these behemoths that once braved countless gales on the open sea and now lie, silent and helpless, on this deserted beach. You can just hear the waves licking sweetly at the cove, but at times you seem to hear wails coming from the huge iron carcasses, like pleas for help. It's the wind blowing through the gutted hulls and the small holes opened by the rust that slowly digests the iron.

The true story about the origin of this graveyard is uncertain and depends on who tells it. The fishermen, who are the only ones who retain the collective memory of this place, are divided in their explanations. Some say the ships were towed to this bay because they were abandoned in the entrance channel to the port of Luanda after the companies that owned them went bankrupt. Others claim that it was the sea currents that dragged them to these sandbanks and the cost of removing them discouraged shipowners from recovering them. Still others claim that some of these ships were deliberately run aground by their crews at night to unload weapons for the civil war that raged in the country between 1975 and 2002.



The ships lay abandon in a bay forty kilometers north of Luanda.

Whatever the true story of this place and of each of its ghosts, over dozens of years the carcasses of these sleeping giants have been battered by winds and rains and the corrosion of seawater. Powerless to defend themselves, they succumbed to the rust in a slow agony, which undermined their hulls and opened huge holes that let you see their insides and exposed the huge engines, now inert and silent. Some have broken in half, opening the way for armies of crabs that quickly invade their corners in search of food brought by the tides. Their fate is sealed. Slowly and inexorably, these monsters are diluting in the calm waters of the bay, releasing the iron oxide as if it were the last shred of blood still running through their veins.

As an act of mercy, the slow agony of these giants has been abruptly halted and their final death will come sooner than expected. A few years ago, the fishermen who prowl the bay and dare to challenge the submerged wrecks that often break their fishing nets, remembered to collect loose pieces of iron, and started selling them to metal-collecting companies for recycling. A lucrative



The ships began appearing in the bay in 1976. More than twenty ships were abandoned here. After the Chinese dismantled the superstructures of many, only seven half-submerged hulls remain.



business has sprung up selling pieces of iron stripped from stranded ships. The news reached the ears of the Chinese, who quickly seized the areas of the bay where the most desirable carcasses lay, leaving the most dilapidated and half-sunk wrecks for the fishermen who had meanwhile been seduced by this sort of iron fever.

The crabs, which were the only life that used to frequent these rusty metal carcasses, are forced to retreat early in the morning, when the beach buzzes with a frenzy of men and machines preparing for a feast of sorts. As if they were predators devouring the carcasses of dead animals, they painstakingly shred the hulls of stranded ships to harvest the coveted metal.

Meanwhile, in the far corner of the bay, where only half-dead carcasses remain, a dozen men on small motorcycles with a trailer arrive on the beach from the nearest village. Unlike the Chinese, these men work using only their bare hands and arm strength. It is not about making a profit from the

iron business, but about their survival and that of their families. They have no cranes or tractors and constantly must improvise ingenious solutions to get the large iron plates out of the bowels of the ships, while battling the waves that invade the hulls when the tide rises. A heavy hammer and a blowtorch, carried to the wreck on a raft made of pieces of styrofoam covered with a fishing net, is all they need. The fragile raft also serves to transport those who can't swim, but who have to overcome their fear of venturing out to sea every day in order to get to work.

Everyone who works here has well-defined roles, like a finely tuned orchestra, and help each other. The work of cutting the iron on the ship's carcasses is dangerous and requires a lot of skill and courage. Years of slow corrosion of metals in this bay have turned its waters dark and created a thick silt bottom that hides sharp pieces of iron. It's easy to get cuts and wounds from the submerged debris and the edges of the hulls that can result in tetanus or infections which take months to clear up. Nevertheless, the youngest work barefoot and do not use any hand protection.





The beach is about 10 kilometers from the village where the men live. They have to go on rented motorcycles because most of the access is via the beach when the tide is out. In the rainy season (from November to March) the dirt road is almost impassable because of the mud.





The day begins as the men make there way out the abandon hulls.



The men work every day except Sunday. They usually arrive around 6am and only leave in the afternoon when the tide starts to come in again.



Just getting to the hulls is difficult and dangerous. The men have no protective gear to protect themselves. The luckier ones wear gloves. Visibility underwater is impossible because the waters of the bay are dark due to the sediments and oil still leaking from some of the hulls. They dive and feel the bottom with their hands to find the pieces of the broken structure.







All of the men have been injured at one point or another. Some very seriously.



The danger of lifting and moving heavy pieces of sharp and corroded iron in water that is deep and constantly shifting is a significant part of an average workday.



Once the iron plates weighing hundreds of kilos have been separated from the ship's skeleton by the men who specialize in cutting, they are thrown into the water to be carried to the beach. In the water waits another team, the one that will take the pieces to the beach. They all dive at the same time to lift one end of the plates and turn it until it falls back to the bottom of the sea. They repeat this movement as many times as necessary to overcome the approximately 100 meters that separate them from the beach. Once they reach the beach, the group, already tired from the effort made in the water, still has to lift the heavy pieces by force of arms and place them on the small motorcycles that carry the pieces to the warehouse.

The end of the day is eagerly awaited by all. It has been another day of intense and exhausting work in the bay, shredding pieces of the giants and diving endlessly to lift the heavy pieces of their flesh. It seems the sea has become an ally of the iron skeletons and is not willing to give them up easily. Exhausted, the men abandon the beach, that slowly reclaims the silence of the approaching night, as if responding to a final call of truce from the sleeping giants.









Once the men have dislodged pieces of scrap from the hulls, it is piled onto makeshift rafts & rowed back to shore.





Brief History

For 400 years, Angola was a Portuguese colony. On January 15, 1975, the Portuguese government, and the leaders of the three independence movements signed the Alvor Agreement. That day, Angola became an independent nation. Under the terms of the agreement, all three groups agreed to a power sharing coalition. The three factions were: The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), led by Jonas Savimbi; The National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), led by Holden Roberto; and The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) led by Agostinho Neto. However, disagreements between the groups' leadership led to outbreaks of violence and quickly escalated into civil war.

The conflict was further complicated by the Cold War. Angola became a proxy battleground between the United States and the Soviet Union. UNITA and the FNLA were supported by South Africa, the US, France, Israel, and the UK. The MPLA, was supported by the USSR, Cuba, and other Eastern bloc nations. The civil war would go on, with intermittent cease fires, from 1975 – 2002. Agostinho Neto died in 1979 and was succeeded by José dos Santos. As the FNLA withered away, UNITA continued to fight. The war did not end until Jonas Savimbi was killed.

The war tore the country apart. When it finally ended, over one million people were killed, another 4 million displaced, and some 70,000 lost limbs from brutal terror tactics, torture, and intimidation, almost two-thirds of Angolans lacked access to drinking water, and the infant death toll rose drastically. Thirty percentage of the children died before age five.

During the course of the conflict, many important civil institutions were destroyed: schools, hospitals and government buildings across large parts of the country. With the war often lacking obvious frontlines amid seasonal offensives, large parts of the population were relegated to “grey zones” where humanitarian agencies struggled to operate and were often exploited by the combatants. Angola is also one of the heaviest mined countries in

the world, and the heavy use of antipersonnel devices disrupted agriculture and threatened movement in rural areas.¹

The greatest travesty of the situation is that Angola is rich in natural resources which could make it one of the largest economies in the world. The country has large deposits of oil, diamonds, iron ore, phosphates, bauxite, uranium, gold, granite, copper, feldspar, lithium, cobalt, and manganese.

Even though Angola has one of the fastest growing economies in Africa, most Angolans live on less than \$2.00 a day. The youth unemployment rate (ages 15-24) is 52.90%.

10 Facts About Living Conditions in Angola

The living conditions in Angola are indicative of an economy that is not yet diversified and a country with extreme income inequality.

1. **Low Life Expectancy and Causes:** Angola has a very low life expectancy. The life expectancy in Angola is one of the lowest in the world, and Angola has the 12th highest number of infant mortalities every year. The leading causes of death revealed that the low life expectancy is a result of preventable causes like diarrhea diseases, malaria, neonatal disorders and influenza.

2. **Literacy:** A third of all Angolans are illiterate. Although primary education is compulsory in Angola, 33.97 percent of Angolans are illiterate and literacy rates have been on a steady decline since 2001. Very few individuals go on to college, leaving their economy stagnated with a brain drain and a lack of available employees for white-collar jobs that require a deep understanding of their field.

3. **Clean Water Availability:** Angola has a lack of clean water resources. Forty-four percent of Angolans do not have access to clean water, according to the United Nations Children's Agency. The Public Water Company in the capital of Angola, Luanda, reports that although the daily need for water is well over a million cubic meters of clean water per day, the public water company EPAL can only supply 540,000 cubic meters of clean water per day. This leaves

many without clean water. Even if EPAL were to have the capacity to supply all residents with clean water, it does not have the infrastructure to do so.

4. Access to Electricity: Few Angolans have access to electricity. In rural areas, only 6 percent of Angolans have access to electricity. In urban areas, 34 percent of Angolans have electricity, leaving homes without power.

5. Income Inequality: There is a severe gap between wealth in urban and rural areas. Income inequality in Angola is one of the highest in the world at 28.9 percent. Poverty is highest in rural areas where percent of the population qualifies as poor. This is contrasted by the fact that only 29.9 percent of the urban population qualifies as poor.

6. Public School Enrollment: There is low enrollment in public schools and UNESCO reports that enrollment has been on a steady decline since 2009. The low enrollment rate may be because many schools and roads suffered during Angola's civil war and because many schools are located in inconvenient and rural locations with poor sanitation and untrained teachers.

7. Unemployment: Unemployment is very high in Angola. Angolan unemployment has increased by 1.7 percent since 2018, growing to 30.7 percent. The youth unemployment rate is at an all-time high of 56.1 percent.

8. Oil-based Economy: The economy is not very diversified. Angola is an oil-rich country and as such, more than one-third of the Angolan economy comes from oil and over 90 percent of Angolan exports are oil. Because the oil sector has been public for so long, the economy was prone to contractions and inflations along with global fluctuation in oil prices. This has left the stability of the Angolan economy at the mercy of oil prices, which have been rapidly fluctuating, destabilizing the economy.

9. Food Insecurity: Many Angolans suffer from severe food insecurity. In fact, 2.3 million Angolan citizens are food insecure, and over 1 million of those individuals are children under 5 years old. Because of government

redistribution of land, many farmers have lost their best grazing land and their arable land for crops, leading to a lack of meat and produce.

10. Unpaid Debts: Unpaid debts threaten to dampen economic growth. After a long economic slump, the Angolan economy has further suffered due to unpaid loans. Twenty-seven percent of total Angolan credits are loans that are defaulted or close to being defaulted, and 16 percent of the largest bank in Angola, BIA, are not being reimbursed.²

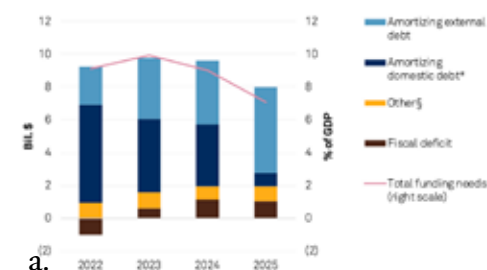
Another factor that is of great concern is that the fertility rate of Angolan women is 5.3 in the cities and 8.2 in rural areas. How will the country create jobs for young people in 15-20 years' time?

Angola has also taken on a tremendous amount of foreign debt. China is its biggest lender. The UK's international institute Chatham House revealed that Angola is the African country that has borrowed the most from China in the last 20 years, to the tune of over \$40 billion.³

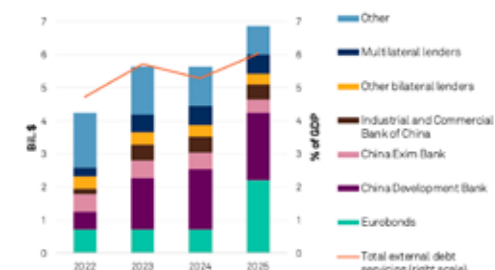
Angola's Large External Debt Redemptions Add To Funding Risks

- Angola's total funding needs will peak in 2023 at 10% of GDP after the debt restructuring agreements with two Chinese banks end.
- External debt servicing will increase to \$5.6 billion over 2023-2024 and nearly \$7 billion in 2025, from \$4.3 billion in 2022.

Funding Needs Are Dominated By External Debt Repayments



External Interest And Principal Repayments Will Rise From 2023



*Based on debt currently contracted. \$Other includes recapitalization of public entities and clearance of arrears. Sources: Angola Ministry of Finance, S&P Global Ratings.

In the coming years, around 70% of Angolan government revenues will go to servicing the country's \$73 billion debt, according to IMF data. ⁴

In addition to the economic situation, the present government has a dubious human rights record. Human Rights Watch, implicated the Angolan state security forces have for serious human rights abuses, including more than a dozen extrajudicial executions and other unlawful killings, excessive use of force against peaceful protesters, and arbitrary detentions, throughout 2023. Angolan authorities continued to forcibly evict people and conduct demolitions without the necessary procedural guarantees or the provision of alternative adequate housing or adequate compensation for those evicted. They have continued to use draconian media laws to repress and harass journalists in order to control the flow of information. ⁵

The conflict has created terrible consequences that affect the lives of Angola's citizens to this day. Transparency International, which rates the level of corruption in a country, places Angola as one of the most corrupt in the world. Until the corruption, nepotism, bribery, and repression changes; the income inequality will grow and opportunities for the larger population and will remain stalled or worsen.



1. The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/may/25/kissinger-at-100-the-bloody-dreadful-filthy-angolan-civil-war-in-pictures>

2. Denise Sprimont, Borgenproject, <https://borgenproject.org/living-conditions-in-angola>

3. Northafricapost, <https://northafricapost.com/64110-angolas-debts-to-china-a-record-of-over-40-billion.html>

4. Wall Street Journal, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/angolas-debt-to-china-looms-as-nation-holds-tight-elections-11661357463>

5. Human Rights Watch, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/angola?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiA8sauBhB3EiwAruTRJgnYaro7A6OX2ihi6TyS_yPEBJZ7QDSIdbohruoO2OWvkyeXZ696hoCYP8QAvD_BwE





The Titanic Gang

The section of the bay where the oldest wrecks lie, now mere rusty skeletons that are hardly reminiscent of the ships that proudly sailed the oceans in the past, is known by the locals as Titanic Beach. The group of young men who work here, using only their hands, arm strength and courage to pull large pieces of iron out of the water to sell by weight, quickly became known as the Titanic gang.

The gang arrives at the beach early, with the sun still peeking over the horizon. They have to take advantage of the low tide, which leaves the wreckage more exposed and allows them to reach it by walking along the muddy bottom of the bay. Perched on top of their motorcycles, they stop at the place where they usually leave their work equipment hidden under the beach's undergrowth and the garbage that the tides deposit every day. Tattered pants, thick socks and a pair of old sneakers are all they have to protect themselves from cuts on the edges of rusty irons. The more experienced ones, the "professionals" as they like to be called, proudly wear a pair of gloves, although they are already torn on the fingers and worn out by the sea water.

Despite trying to protect themselves, they have all dealt with wounds that took months to heal. Some have lost fingers, cut off while working or amputated because the wounds gangrened. The lack of adequate medical care and the continuous exposure to the polluted water of the bay prolong the time of the infections, which can spread to other parts of the body.

The gang knows the wreckage on the surface like the back of their hands, but the bottom of the bay is still an unknown world to them. They've already salvaged everything there is to take from the nearest parts of the beach, but now they must venture further and further out, where the waves crash violently against the wreckage and create dangerous currents. Others explore the deepest recesses of the wreck where no one has yet









In order to bring the pieces to shore, the men must fight the currents and waves, while carrying very heavy weights.



ventured, passing through holes where they barely fit and which quickly submerge at high tide, potentially leaving them trapped in the ships' closed compartments. The need to find unexplored areas fuels courage and daring.

While the groups of older, more organized men work with blowtorches to cut the iron plates, the Titanic gang has to improvise. They dive endlessly, blindly groping the bottom of the bay with their hands, trying to find pieces of iron corroded by rust that have come off the hulls of the ships. It's impossible to see anything underwater; the slow agony of the iron giants has released sediments and oils that have turned the waters of the bay dark and pasty.

When they come across a heavy part or one that needs to be detached from the hull using force, they get together in a team in which everyone seems to know their role. Sometimes they use steel cables or old ropes that they also salvage from the wreckage, but what counts in the end is the strength and experience acquired over years of working in the bowels of these sleeping monsters.

Nothing here is done in isolation, everyone works as a team and shares individual knowledge and skills, even with the youngest member of the gang, Pedro who is only 15. They don't have blowtorches or heavy cutting tools, so they are incapable of separating large blocks from the debris that still resist the onslaught of Chinese companies, eager for material to feed their iron-processing furnaces for the construction industry. Despite this, they regularly climb the few skeletons that stubbornly remain above water, as if they were monuments to a kind of resilience to the forces of nature, to scavenge their entrails in search of pieces of rusty flesh that they can turn into food for their families.

After finding loose parts or detaching boards from the wreckage in fights that can take hours, they still have to overcome the hundreds of meters that separate them from the beach. Sometimes the effort is all done underwater because the tide fills up quickly and the waves and currents pull them out to sea.













Often, after an intense struggle to reach the beach with the heavy pieces of iron, they throw themselves on the sand exhausted and shivering with cold. But they can't afford to lie down for long, even though their bodies are begging for rest. Reaching the beach with the heavy pieces after battling the waves and the shallows littered with sharp irons and pieces of metal is not the last effort. Despite being exhausted, the men still have to put the day's booty on the back of the motorcycles. It's the last test of strength and endurance before they leave the beach.

Copper and bronze are the equivalent of gold in this bizarre aquatic mine. While iron is paid for at around 120 dollars a ton, a kilogram of copper yields 3.5 dollars, and bronze is around 2 dollars a kilogram. Unfortunately, copper and bronze are already in short supply, so the gang has to be happy with iron mined with rust that takes away much of its original weight.

Perched on top of the iron plates, they take the motorcycles to another part of the beach about 2 km from where they work, where the iron is weighed, and they finally get the money they've been waiting for. However, the reward for an intense and exhausting day's work, in which they have taken many risks, is meager. On average, a day's work on the Titanic beach earns the gang around 300 to 500 kilos of iron, which means distributing around 60 dollars to everyone. That's why there's always a tomorrow for the Titanic gang until there are no more iron skeletons in the bay.



On the beach, the scrap is weighed on a portable scales. It will be sold to intermediaries who resell it at small factories at a much higher price.





The middlemen transport the scrap on their motorcycles to an area, about three kilometers away from the beach, where it is loaded onto trucks. The scrap is washed at the factories and melted down in furnaces to be transformed into iron for the construction industry.





An exhausted worker sleeps on the beach after a grueling day's of work.



Iron is paid at \$128.00 US a ton, bronze at \$1.60 US a Kilogram, and copper at \$3.20 US a Kilogram. The men earn around \$5.00 U.S. a day for their labor.





João Coelho

João Coelho is a self-taught documentary photographer based in Angola, where he was born and lived until the age of 11, and where he returned about 15 years ago to work on public modernization and social development projects. The daily contact with the lives of people struggling to survive sparked in him a keen interest in studying the human condition and an enormous willingness to tell these people's stories. João has won numerous international awards in documentary and photojournalism. Among his awards in 2023, he was elected Amateur Photographer of the Year by the Spider Awards; Photographer of the Year at the European Photography Awards; International Discovery of the Year by the reFocus Awards World Photo Annual; Winner and Discovery of The Year by the Monochrome Awards; Winner of the Year at the New York Photography Awards; Photographer of the Year at 35 Awards; and Winner at Pollux Awards.

Richard Falco

Richard Falco is President of Vision Project. For the past thirty years he has worked as a photographer, filmmaker, and journalist. He has had assignments on four continents in over thirty-five countries and has worked for many major magazines, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Geo*, *Life Magazine*, *New York Times*, *US News & World Report*, to name a few. There are two published books of Mr. Falco's work: *Medics: A Documentation of Paramedics in the Harlem Community* and *To Bear Witness/ September 11*, and two eBooks: *Hunger and Rice in Asia* and *Witchcraft: Ancient Traditions Alive In Salem*. He is the director of the films *Crossroads: Rural Health Care In America* and *Holding Back the Surge*, and is the executive producer of *Josie: A Story About Williams Syndrome* and *Dorothea's Tears: The State of Mental Health Care in America*. Falco is a 15-time award winner for Excellence in Journalism from the Society of Professional Journalist, a winner of the International Media Award, and the Society of Publication Designers. He is presently Coordinator of Multimedia Journalism in the Masters in Communication Program at Sacred Heart University.

This project is a production of

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Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of investigative journalism, documentary photography, multimedia, film, and education.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural, and historical impact documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in journalism, photography, video, design, web technology, and education.

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For further information contact:

Vision Project Inc.
www.visionproject.org
info@visionproject.org