

ALUMNI AT LARGE

CUITO CUANAVALE

– a turning point in the battle to end apartheid

In the year that marks the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale, a violent and sustained period of fighting within the Angolan civil war, LSE alumnus **Edward Crowther** (BSc Economics 2002), location manager with the HALO Trust, talks to *LSE Connect* about a devastating legacy left behind by the significant battle that still affects the lives of local communities a quarter of a century later.



Cuito Cuanavale is a small town on the Cuito River in the Cuando Cubango province of Angola. From the outside it appears to have little strategic importance, but in late 1987 and early 1988 it became the focus of a fierce and prolonged battle, which ended on 23 March when the Angolan army, supported by Cuban forces, repelled the advances of the South African Defence Force-backed UNITA, the

National Union for the Total Independence of Angola. Today, 23 March 1988 is a date that resonates with many for its perceived role in heralding the end of South African apartheid (see boxed section).

During this battle – and all across Angola throughout the 27-year civil war – both sides laid thousands of anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. The vast majority were placed in and around towns and villages that

are still today recovering from years of fighting and attempting to develop economies that will enable their communities to cope with expanding populations. Despite the historical and political significance afforded to the town through its associated battle, the minefields around Cuito Cuanavale remain, making it one of the most heavily mined areas in Africa.

Edward works with the HALO Trust, an NGO operating in Angola and other landmine-afflicted countries. From 2011–13, he spent 18 months working with local field teams to remove mines from Cuito Cuanavale and communities in three other provinces in the country.

He explains: “Even now, years after the war ended, living within these communities can still be hazardous. Landmines have a devastating impact on people’s lives beyond the very obvious physical perils they pose. Basic

everyday tasks such as collecting water, growing food and fetching firewood – staples of family life – can often demand travelling through a minefield. Mine-littered roads deny vehicular access too, cutting off communities from the outside world.”

According to HALO, anti-tank mines on roads pose a far greater problem in Angola than in any other mine-affected country in the world today. They



hamper commerce by restricting the flow of goods and impede healthcare by preventing government and NGO-led initiatives such as vaccination and education awareness programmes from being able to reach certain communities.

Edward continues: "We have worked with communities unable to farm their own land – arable land they are desperate to use to create a sustainable livelihood that supports their families. People who are willing and able to provide for themselves are prevented from determining their own futures. It affects generation after generation."

But, thanks to the work of HALO and its local field teams in Angola, there is better news on the horizon.

Slowly yet surely, the landmines are being located and destroyed – enabling communities to resume everyday life.

While not perhaps envisaging the career path he ended up taking when he began his Economics degree in 1999, Edward is aware that his experiences at LSE contributed significantly to the choices he made. "When I arrived at LSE, I thought I was taking the first steps towards a career in banking. That was the plan but something changed for me. I began to think in different, broader terms, with a more questioning – maybe even political – focus. It wasn't just the academic side of things; I shared meals with students who were refugees from places I'd never even heard of. It opened my mind," he states.

After graduating from LSE, Edward volunteered with a small NGO in Cambodia which led him to pursue a master's in Development Studies at SOAS. He then spent two years with Médecins Sans Frontières in Papua New Guinea and Pakistan, before joining the HALO Trust in 2011. ■



Edward Crowther has recently moved from Angola to Sri Lanka to assume the role of location manager with HALO's teams tackling the landmine legacy of another lengthy civil war. You can learn more about the work of the HALO Trust at www.halotrust.org

From Castro to Mandela – a small town with a large footprint

Fidel Castro once made the assertion that "the history of Africa will be written as before and after Cuito Cuanavale". If the writing of history is the preserve of the victor, as is often claimed, then he was making a very deliberate point about a separate, politically greater battle.

For all that the outcome of the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1987-88 is still contested, it arguably helped to bring about the beginning of the end of apartheid – even though it formed just one part of Angola's bloody

27-year-long civil war, which continued until 2002 and resulted in 500,000 deaths and over one million Angolans being internally displaced.

While the battle didn't signal the end of the civil war, its broader ramifications were so significant that Nelson Mandela would later recognise it as a defining moment in African history, stating: "Cuito Cuanavale was the turning point for the liberation of our continent – and of my people – from the scourge of apartheid."

On 23 March 1988, the majority of SADF troops, under orders from Pretoria, retreated after their

tanks failed to breach a massive minefield laid on the banks of the Cuito River. South Africa's regional agenda was revised to such an extent that it was forced back to the negotiating table; it was ultimately the beginning of the end of apartheid.

In a marked gesture in South Africa's Freedom Park, outside Pretoria, the names of 2,070 Cubans who died in Angola join those of South Africans who died during the anti-apartheid struggle.