



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Acceptance Speech

Rafael Marques de Morais

2006

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am here today to celebrate with you a moment of solidarity and, at the same time, to concern you with Angola. Ours is a tragic country, whose people have always yearned for peace but instead experienced foreign-sponsored civil war, exploitation of its natural resources, and international indifference.

In the last two years there has been a great effort by the government to project a more positive image of Angola. The focus has been on the very high GDP growth, as initially reported by the International Monetary Fund, derived from an increase of oil production and prices. In our capital, Luanda, rise a few skyscrapers for multinational corporations and extremely wealthy nationals. Housing developments for the privileged are also springing up in the capital, as well as fine shops and restaurants. But not for the people!

Since independence, we have been led by false promises. Soviet and Cuban military help arrived. Then the west had a change of heart towards Angola after the arrival of peace, and was supposed to hold an international donors' conference to help rebuild it. That conference never took place. Now we have the Chinese miracle: a promise that the Chinese will rebuild the country's infrastructure. We'll see.

Such empty promises have bypassed the obvious need for internal dialogue, better use of the country's resources to improve the people's well-being, and for the government to serve those it claims to represent.

Open, participatory and transparent dialogue is fundamental to the task of addressing nation-building, reconstruction, and defining of the country's future. We must end the cycles of reckless and undignified dependency on external powers.

Angola needs to change how its people live. For example, over 60% survive on a dollar and a half a day, and Angola has the second highest infant mortality rate in the world.

What is happening today is a legal and political process of privatizing the State for the benefit of the current ruling class. To do so, the regime counts on the full support of the foreign powers in need of Angolan oil, diamonds and other natural resources. Incidentally, Angola provides 8% of the oil consumed in the U.S.

For President Dos Santos' 27-year grip on power, all that matters is international legitimacy, to avoid having his regime be subjected to internal democratic scrutiny.

On August 21, 2006, the World Bank country representative issued a critical statement asking the media and civil society organizations to stop using its reports to criticize the Angolan government. But the Bank claims to support transparency initiatives, as well as strengthening civil society organization in the country. So its statement goes against the right of access to information, which is fundamental for transparency and democracy.

MCK, a critical young Angolan rapper, has just released an album in which he sings that "we export oil and import suffering." How do we change this reality?

Two collaborators from the countryside asked me for help. We scraped our pennies together, and set out to ask very modest individuals to contribute in kind for human rights monitoring in the lawless diamond-rich region of Lundas, in the northeast of the country. José Bartolomeu, a local citizen, described their current condition in blunt terms: "Angola is a foreign country to us. We Angolans are treated worse than animals."[1](#)

By early last year, I had lost any ability to continue to carry out meaningful civic work due to a successful campaign to isolate, drain all known sources of support and to turn me into an outcast. In Angola, for business to proceed as usual, it becomes necessary to squash any alternative voices that challenge the powers that be. As an uncompromised civic campaigner, I came to be labeled a radical, a danger to some private and international interests.

I use as a guide Martin Luther King's assertion that "if we are to speed up the coming of the new age we must have the moral courage to stand up and protest against injustice wherever we find it."[2](#)

Now, with the country at peace, Angolans can address this long history of disenfranchisement of the individual, by civil war, by the current policy of winner takes all, and lastly, by institutionalized corruption. People are forced to be corrupt on a daily basis to survive.

As Martin Luther King says, "The urgency of the hour calls for leaders of wise judgment and sound integrity – leaders not in love with money, but in love with justice; leaders not in love with publicity, but in love with humanity; leaders who can subject their particular egos to the greatness of the cause."[3](#)

Angola is in need of a government that protects its own people and brings them together to build a strong nation, and to give them dignity and honor.

Hence, in humbleness, I accept the Civil Courage Prize as a step toward a different Angola, grounded on the values of justice, freedom and integrity.

My beloved family has been a blessing. I could not have done what I have without them. My son Okidi is already learning to excuse me for my long absences and short spans of attention when present. I dedicate this award to my son Okidi.

I take a moment now to express my gratitude to the Northcote Parkinson Fund Trustees for honoring me this year. To Mr. John Train, my benefactor, Ann Sloane, Molly Hickok and Barbara Becker, who have been so friendly in organizing my visit, I thank you.

I hereby express my deep gratitude to Deborah Harding and Anne Luzzatto who nominated me for this prize.

Thank you so much, distinguished guests, for sharing this moment of reflection with me.

1 Marques, Rafael, Operation Kissonde: The Diamonds of Humiliation and Misery (www.cuango.net)

2 King, Martin Luther, Jr. Facing the Challenge of a New Age, in A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., page 143, (ed.) James M. Washington, Harper & Row, Publishers

3 Idem.