

LUANDA PAYS THE PRICE / *Festering garbage and potholed streets are only part of the story as shabby, filthy capital totters on brink of collapse*

War, corruption bring once-charming city to its knees

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Luanda

THE city that used to be known as the Rio de Janeiro of Africa for its natural beauty and colonial charm is falling on hard times.

After nearly two decades of civil war, government corruption and a recent influx of 750,000 refugees fleeing Angola's civil war, Luanda is shabby, filthy and on the verge of collapse.

Piles of festering garbage line the once fashionable beach-front avenue, which is riddled with potholes. There are no taxis and there is a chronic shortage of water, electricity and even newsprint for the local newspaper. Elevators that work are so rare that many of the shafts have been converted into garbage chutes.

The skeletons of high-rise apartment blocks — residential projects started by European real-estate developers before the country's independence from Portugal in 1975 — are still waiting to be completed. Many have been invaded by squatters, who have turned them into

high-rise shantytowns; others are almost completely overgrown with tree-sized weeds.

Corruption and inefficiency have plagued municipal development for so long that residents joke that the only major urban renewal project to be completed in Luanda in recent memory is the new driveway to the house of President Jose Eduardo dos Santos.

"This city is a mess because the municipal government doesn't want to invest anything in making things better," city morgue director Domingos Fernandes said, adding that with the chronic electricity shortages morgue officials cannot properly store bodies. As it is, with only 42 refrigerated storage units and an increasing number of deaths because of the city's rapid growth in the past year, morgue officials are having to pile bodies up in the morgue's fly-infested courtyard.

"There's never been enough space here, even when there wasn't a war going on. But now it's just a matter of time before we have a serious problem with pestilence in Luanda," Mr. Fernandes said, covering his

nose as he points to a pile of bodies stacked outside the main door to the morgue awaiting autopsies.

Indeed, foreign health officials worry that the rainy season, which will begin in January, will bring the worst cholera epidemic in history to Luanda. The teaming shantytowns that encircle the city are the main breeding ground for the disease. Most have no sewage or water facilities.

ACCORDING to one foreign-aid worker, Luanda's cash-strapped and inefficient municipal government did "absolutely nothing" to respond to the recent population explosion, which many aid organizations are calling an urban state of emergency.

Sixteen years of brutal civil war caused an urban population explosion that Luanda's municipal authorities were ill prepared to deal with. Luanda grew from an estimated 250,000 inhabitants in 1960 to 1.7 million in 1992 as thousands of people were uprooted from their homes in the interior by the fighting between government troops and re-

bel forces of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (known by its Portuguese acronym UNITA).

Then, following UNITA's defeat in the country's first free multiparty elections last year, fighting resumed and a record 750,000 refugees arrived in Luanda, settling in the city's already overcrowded shantytowns. Today the population of Luanda hovers between 2.5 million and 3 million people. So far, no new census has been taken.

"Although some of the older *musseques* (shantytowns) have well-established sewage and clean water facilities, the newer communities are completely ill equipped because of the recent population explosion," says Marion Birch, a nurse co-ordinating a cholera-prevention program for Development Workshop, a Canadian non-governmental organization specializing in urban planning in poor communities in Africa and Asia.

"Since it's a squatter population the municipal government has determined that nobody officially lives there, and so it doesn't spend a

penny on development."

Sambizanga, a shantytown of 85,000 inhabitants on the outskirts of Luanda where the Development Workshop has one of its most important community projects, may be one of the hardest hit by the cholera epidemic, health officials say.

Development Workshop officials are spending about \$750,000 to install sewers and facilities for clean water and to continue a health and civic-awareness campaign.

The municipal water-treatment plant on the outskirts of the city is able to meet only 30 per cent of the needs of the urban population. Already, about half of that water is reportedly siphoned off clandestinely for illegal commercial use.

"In Luanda, a poor family could spend half of their monthly income buying water," said Allan Cain, the director of Development Workshop and Canada's honorary consul in Angola.

On Sambizanga's main dirt road, a team of ragged workmen dig trenches for the pipes that will soon supply the community with water. The workers, who live in Sambi-

zanga, are part of the community's food-for-work brigade and are paid with donations of food from Canadian wheat farmers. With 1,400-per cent annual inflation and the monthly minimum wage equivalent to \$4 (the price of a six-pack of beer in Angola), many workers in Luanda prefer to be paid in food.

The Canadian organization has also started various community awareness and health programs in Sambizanga that teach the inhabitants how to treat their waste so that piles of garbage don't become breeding grounds for cholera. In addition to operating a local clinic, community-health workers teach residents how to prevent and treat diarrhea, which is the most common affliction in the shantytown along with scabies, a skin infection brought on by poor hygienic conditions.

"Here we have to start at scratch because the people who have come here lost everything and are not accustomed to living in an urban environment," said Maria Orquidea Saraiva, a project worker in Sambizanga. "It's as if they are starting at zero."