Two Women, Opposite Fortunes

Nicholas Kristof

LUANDA, Angola — THIS is the tale of two women, each an emblem, in her own way, of [one of the world’s most corrupt and dysfunctional nations](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/19/opinion/nicholas-kristof-deadliest-country-for-kids.html).

One of the women is Isabel dos Santos, Africa’s richest woman. The daughter of Angola’s president, she is worth $3 billion and is Africa’s only female billionaire as well as its youngest billionaire, [according to Forbes](http://www.forbes.com/sites/kerryadolan/2013/08/14/how-isabel-dos-santos-took-the-short-route-to-become-africas-richest-woman/). The magazine found that all her major Angolan investments were in companies seeking to do business there or were achieved by a stroke of her father’s pen.

She has extravagant tastes. For her 10th wedding anniversary, she flew in guests from all over the world for days of lavish celebration. Dos Santos declined to comment, but she is widely seen as a symbol of Angola’s status as one of the most corrupt countries in the world — “graft on a scale never before seen in Africa,” the Angolan journalist Rafael Marques de Morais told me.

The other woman, more typical, is Delfina Fernandes, and I met her at the end of a bone-rattling journey over impossibly rutted dirt roads in a village called Kibanga in the northern part of the country. Blind in one eye, she lives in a grass-roof hut without electricity or running water, and without access to health care.

Fernandes unrolled a homemade mat of straw on the ground and sat beside me there, telling me that she had lost 10 children (her neighbor, Ana Luciano, who had lost only four children and has a fifth now sick with malaria, said that sounded right). Perhaps the most excruciating blow a parent can suffer is to lose a child, and that has happened 10 times to Fernandes.

It’s impossible to be sure how her children died because, like half the country’s population, the family is beyond the orbit of the health care system. Therefore, her children never received birth certificates or death certificates. Yet a good guess is that they succumbed to malaria and malnutrition.

In all, Fernandes, 50, says she had 15 children, of whom five survive. She had never heard of family planning, like other women I spoke to along the road, and, in any case, none is available in rural areas here.

For people like Fernandes, life isn’t that different from a few hundred years ago. There is no school in this area, so she and everyone else nearby is illiterate. Several villagers I talked to had never heard of the United States or Barack Obama, couldn’t recognize a single letter and had no idea that mosquitoes cause malaria.

“Fifty percent of Angolans live outside the orbit of any health care,” noted [Dr. Stephen Foster](http://www.ceml.org/the-hospital/personnel/), an American surgeon who runs a rural hospital near Lubango. “They’re still getting what the traditional healer would have given them if they’d come by in the 17th century.”

Fernandes was gracious and hospitable — and also stoical. She never complained, and only when I asked about her rotting, disintegrating teeth did she acknowledge that she has lost so many teeth that she has trouble eating. She said she suffers relentless dental pain, and that the only relief from the agony comes when she is asleep.

She gave no sign of anger at the government, and when I probed to see whom she blamed for her suffering, she said mildly: “It’s God who takes my children.”

That may be a little unfair to God. An [International Monetary Fund report](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2014/cr14275.pdf) last year noted that Angola has one of the richest pools of natural wealth per person in Africa, yet the country has done much less than its peers to assist ordinary people. And when the I.M.F. reviewed Angola’s books from 2007-10, [it initially found $32 billion missing](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/25/ozatp-imf-angola-idAFJOE80O00O20120125).

“Government corruption at all levels was endemic,” the United States State Department said of Angola [in its annual human rights report](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2013/af/220081.htm) in 2013.

Angola is ranked 161 out of 175 countries by Transparency International in its “[corruption perceptions index](http://www.transparency.org/cpi2014/results).” The World Bank’s “[Doing Business](http://www.doingbusiness.org/data/exploreeconomies/angola#enforcing-contracts)” series ranks Angola 187 out of 189 countries in enforcing contracts.

This is a global problem, of course, not just Angola’s. Two new books, “[Thieves of State](http://www.thievesofstate.com/)” by Sarah Chayes and “[The Looting Machine](http://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/book/the-looting-machine/9781610394390)” by Tom Burgis, document the way corruption is a catastrophe in many poor countries. Angola is simply an extreme example.

This corruption is also a reason [150,000 children die each year in Angola before the age of 5](http://www.data.unicef.org/corecode/uploads/document6/uploaded_pdfs/corecode/SOWC_2015_Summary_and_Tables-final_214.pdf). The health budget is systematically pillaged: de Morais, the Angolan journalist, [cites $58 million that was allocated](http://makaangola.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11550&lang=en) to renovate a particular hospital — and then pretty much vanished.

The differences between dos Santos and Fernandes are vast, but there is a wrenching shared interest in the oil industry. Dos Santos has monetized it, and when I asked Fernandes if she knew that Angola was rich with oil she was a bit confused by the question but said eagerly that she, too, values gasoline when she can afford to buy a swallow.

“I put it in my mouth,” she said, “to dull the pain from my teeth.”