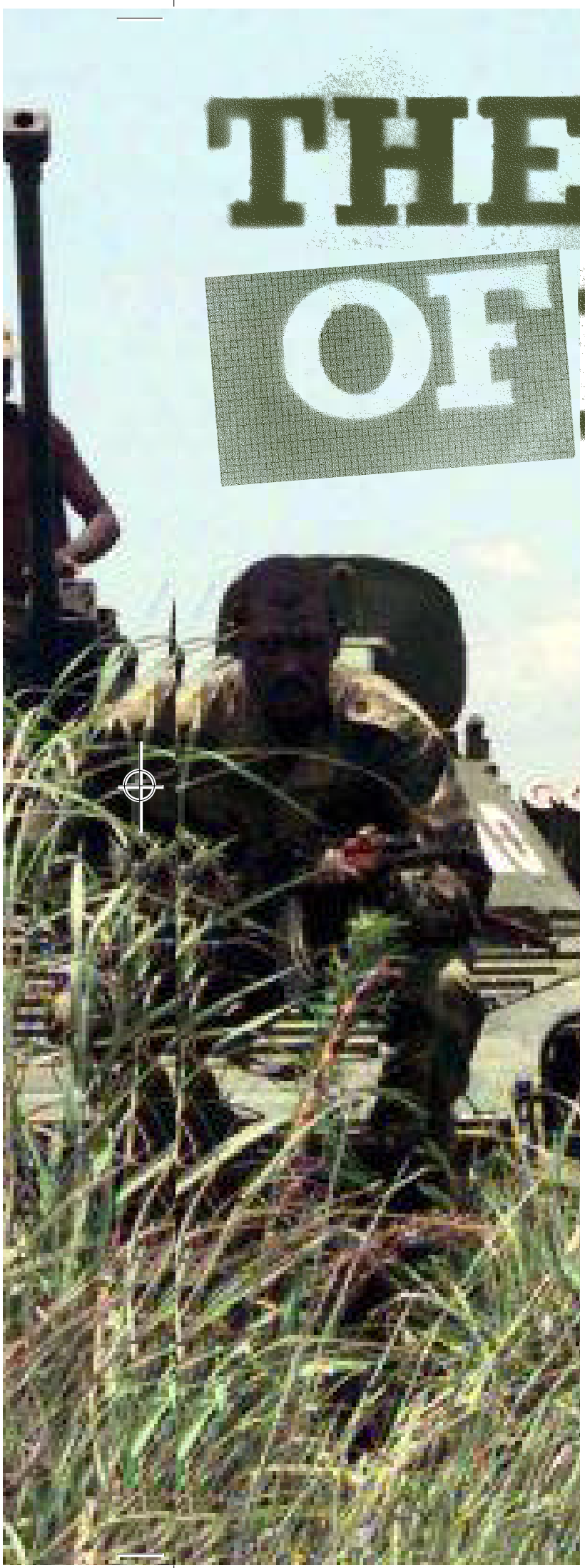
ANGOLA

Government forces – the MPLA – out in force in Huambo, central Angola. Far right: Martin Deeson lends a helping hand

There is one land mine waiting to go off for every member of the Angolan population



THE DOGS OF PEACE

Angola's civil war raged for 28 years. Fuelled by the Cold War it managed to outlast for a decade, it left 1.5 million people dead and turned one of the world's most resource-rich countries into an economic basket case. Martin Deeson travelled to Africa to witness the aftermath

Border crossings tend to be memorable: Israel to the West Bank springs to mind (from First World to Third World in 15 feet) as does the no-man's-land between the old East and West Germany (1950 to 1990 in 100 yards). Even the border between England and France – if you are dumb enough to take the ferry – is some sort of white trash rite of passage. But the line which divides Namibia from Angola takes the inter-country biscuit.

First, there's the border itself: a piece of string stretched across a road and knotted in several places, as if previous travellers had simply ignored this fragile international demarcation and ploughed on through. Second, there's the difference between the two countries. In both size and appearance, Namibia resembles the moon, but it's populated by just a million or so people. The novelist Wilbur Smith once described the Namibian landscape as being "like the rubble God had left over after he created the world", and I found it hard to disagree as, stoned on second-hand hippy smoke, I trundled for days and nights through it. The white Africans I met, mainly descended from German settlers, still have a frontier mentality and many of the blacks live in relative poverty. Some of them live in very real poverty. People starve in Namibia. But people have been known to starve on the streets of London. Angola is a whole different kettle of suffering.

The instant the string is lifted and our aid convoy rolls through the border, the tarmac road gives way to a cratered dirt track. After 28 years of civil war and 18 months of peace, Angola looks like a scrap yard littered with the wet dreams of a loner gun freak. The red dirt ground is carpeted with bullets, spent cartridges and discarded rocket launcher cases. Everywhere. Like sea shells. Each bush is dotted with the burnt-out and

rusted remains of cars and trucks that have driven over landmines: military and civilian vehicles burst open like metal flowers in bloom. I saw two buildings in Angola with roofs, and two with glass in the windows. They were next door to each other; both were built only this year. Otherwise it's utter devastation. Angola is twice the size of France and peppered with 14 million landmines. There is one underground bomb waiting to go off for every member of the Angolan population, or, as one of our number pointed out as we debated the advisability of taking a piss in the bush, there are a million landmines in Angola for every person on our truck. Here, no one wanders off to take a leak. In Angola you piss in your tyre tracks and you walk in other people's footprints.

Angola had a civil war from 1975 to last year. The average life expectancy is around 40 years. No one under 25 has been to school or known anything much other than rape and murder and press-ganged military service. The Cold War took Angola and threw it out the other side because the Cold War was only cold in the West. In Africa the Cold War was hotter than Angolan capital Luanda at lunchtime: diamonds, oil, tribal rivalries, Marxism, imperialism and a two-for-the-price-of-one gun clearance sale. ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS **ANDY KENWORTHY AND GAVIN WICKHAM**

▶ Taken together these facts added up to a recipe for hell on earth, mixed well and served on a bed of human bones with a black blood jus.

Two sides – the post-colonial Marxist MPLA government, which had the backing of just over half the people as well as Cuba and the old Soviet regime, and the UNITA rebels supported by the USA and South Africa – battered the crap out of each other and the civilian population for around a quarter of a century. The country was a testing ground for weapons, too. Agent Orange and the Stinger missile were used here. If it wasn't for the civil war, Angola could have been the richest country in Africa. To this day, it is still the world's seventh largest exporter of oil to America. Not that you'd know it.

I'm here to report on the first ever mission conducted by Yebo! Africa, a new kind of aid agency which is the brainchild of my host, James Pryor. Pryor is a 38-year-old, pony-tailed Brit who grew up in South Africa. A privileged beach bum, he served in the South African special forces before becoming a political lobbyist. For a while in the mid-Nineties he was Head of Presentations in John Major's Number 10. Now he's at the cutting edge of an entirely new kind of relief effort, which he calls Guerrilla Aid.

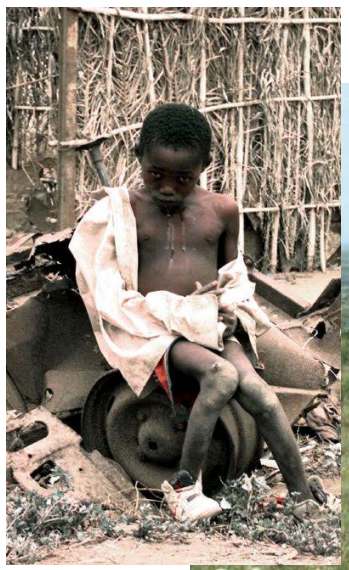
Pryor hopes to use the expertise he gained working as a military intelligence officer specialising in counter-insurgency during South Africa's brutal, messy war with Angola to bring succour to the people of a nation he once helped to destroy. Back then he would journey behind enemy lines, travelling to towns and villages in a bid to convert the people to the cause of UNITA, his government's ally in the battle against the MPLA.

The "conversion" tactics were sometimes violent. Occasionally they would involve hessian sacks over heads, and terrifying helicopter rides with threats to drop suspected "terrorists" from a great height. Pryor has seen horror, too: soldiers blown to pieces, many dead Angolans. Of the four close friends Pryor grew up with near Cape Town, the three he was conscripted into the army with were killed.

In some strange way, the personal suffering he endured, allied to his experience of the brutality of war, was instrumental in Pryor's decision to start Yebo! Africa. "Ever since that time," he says, "I have always had the attitude that nothing can be as bad as what I experienced in those years. And also that life is short, so risks must be taken."

Pryor's sofa-to-Damascus moment came late last year, while he was watching the evening news with his wife in Essex. One image in particular, of a starving nine-year-old girl, hit home. That's when he had the idea for Yebo! Africa. "You know how often you see those African pictures on the news?" says Pryor. "And it's upsetting? But then you light up another fag and it doesn't really register that much? Well, for some reason this one hit home. So I thought, how do you help these people?"

Now he intends to clothe, feed and supply the same starving people he once tried to "convert".



Above: a starving boy sits on a car wreck in a refugee camp near the Angolan capital, Luanda. Right: an MPLA soldier surveys UNITA rebel corpses

PHOTOGRAPHS PA PHOTOS

Angola is a recipe for hell on earth, served on a bed of bones with a black blood jus

Guerrilla Aid works on the theory that in a corrupt, lawless and war-torn country like Angola it's better to use guerrilla tactics, rather than conventional means, to distribute aid. It's also predicated on the idea that by keeping the organisation small and tightknit, money and supplies donated by the public will not be eaten up by the admin costs – as well as the pilfering by corrupt officials – suffered by larger aid agencies and Non Governmental Organisations. Yebo! Africa intends to go about its business by sending small, mobile groups, with local knowledge and an understanding of Africa's intricate tribal systems, to cross borders, hand out the supplies and then get the hell out. It remains to be seen whether this will work on Yebo! Africa's inaugural trip.

The ragged group of volunteers that Pryor has assembled reflects the interests and acquaintances of a man with one foot in the world of hippy and the other in the world of international political relations. Think Sir Richard Branson with a special forces background and you're starting to get the picture, although Pryor might have to kill me for saying so. Fourteen of our number are from his native Essex, where he lives with his wife and three kids. These range from Andy, a local newspaper reporter, to Nick the Druid, who is the custodian of the Hiroshima Peace Flame in a building on the outskirts of Luton.

In the Land Rover Discovery behind us is a group of Californian high school kids led by Alicia Karras, who is the daughter of Nicolas Karras, a mining entrepreneur, the president of the Karras Internationale Foundation and one of Pryor's more colourful contacts. To many on the trip, Karras is a dirty "capitalist". But the bottom line is that without his bankrolling, we definitely would not be here. The group from Essex did the majority of the hard work of collecting the aid (bicycles, tools and various building materials) and Karras paid for all of it, and the hippies, to be transported to Angola. To my mind, this makes the fact that he is a capitalist not so much irrelevant as essential. ▶

Ready to give in Mucusso 'old' town. Below: James Pryor (in orange T-shirt) and volunteers

▶ Back at the border there's a problem. A jumpy crossing guard demands, and is given, cigarettes. He's rattled and armed to the teeth and surprised to find his midday nap disturbed by two 20-foot containers aboard a 16-wheeler truck, a Land Rover full of US kids, two security people and an ex-South African army truck full of 14 hippies from Loughton, two South African drivers and your *GQ* reporter turning up at his backwoods border crossing. Between us we are missing several visas, carrying several illegal side arms and we are, to say the least, unusual. In fact, to all intents and purposes we are unique.

At first it looks as if the unprecedented nature of our convoy is going to panic him into refusing us entry – and he'd be in such deep shit with his superiors if he let us in mistakenly.

Pryor knows what to do to impress an African border guard: he's brandishing impressive looking bits of official paper and generally being persuasive, when Waldo, a Namibian, arrives in his Armoured Personnel Carrier, and we're instantly waved through. Waldo has one of the balls-out craziest jobs in the world. Employed by the UN-run World Food Programme, he drives his APC down the main supply roads. If he succeeds in doing so three times without serious incident, the road is deemed "safe" and container trucks full of food begin using the route. However, any vehicle which does not match the wheelbase of the APC risks being blown to pieces.

I ask Waldo what happens if he hits a mine. "Oh, I throw a tyre," he says. "Maybe bust a rib. I've been lucky." The odds are shortened by his companion on these trips, the mysterious Major Fifi, who rides shotgun and remembers where many of the mines are buried from his days as a UNITA officer.

It's hard to be comfortable around an armed man who doesn't take off his shades when he talks to you. Especially when he's surrounded by his heavily armed firm

Lurching down the road for 15 minutes, past destroyed houses and blank-eyed people who live in discarded freight containers and burnt out military vehicles, we come to the "old" town of Mucusso. Old Mucusso is so old it dates all the way back to the Seventies. It once boasted a dual carriageway on the way into town, a couple of hotels and a dozen or so substantial buildings. Unfortunately for the inhabitants, one of these, the most impressive building, was a residence of the UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi, who died in February 2002. Consequently when UNITA took a pasting so did the town of Mucusso. The "old" town now lies in ruins. Littered with the debris of war, the buildings and roads are overgrown and the 100 or so yards of dual carriageway haven't yet been cleared of mines. Buildings stand toothless and bald, doors and windows blown in, walls pockmarked by heavy machine gun fire and roofs long blown away.

Suddenly there is a terrifying bang and a rush of air. A second or two later we haven't yet felt the truck bump, or the sound wave "splat" in our ears that would rupture our eardrums. So it's not an anti-tank mine. In fact the gear stick from a long-dead vehicle buried under the sand road has ruptured one of our truck's six tyres. "Welcome to Angola," says Rat, one of the volunteers.

Limping on till we reach ground safe enough to jack up the Samil 50 truck, we turn a corner and come upon Mucusso "new town". Planks and corrugated iron make up most of the shacks: one is made of breeze blocks built on a solid base fashioned from hundreds of Soviet ammunition cases. Indeterminate bits of distressed metal are scattered through the town and surrounding minefield.

Under the shade of a large tree in the centre of this camp for returning locals is the tented compound occupied by the chief of police and his uniformed cronies. He comes out to greet this unexpected aid mission from Essex, England. In mirrored shades and sporting the ubiquitous AK-47 and side arm he conducts an intimidating conference with Pryor.

Around us stands a knot of Angolans. Some seem cool and self-possessed. Others are plainly fucked. I find it hard to feel comfortable around an armed man who doesn't take off his mirrored shades when he's talking to you. Especially when he's surrounded by his heavily armed firm. But it turns out Top Cop is going to be nice to us and with his blessing we pitch camp nearby in a circle – every tent door facing another to guard against any kind of trouble. We cook food and a crowd of 50 orphans gathers to watch the spectacle, some with the distended bellies and flies around the eyes familiar to anyone who's ever seen a news report from Ethiopia.

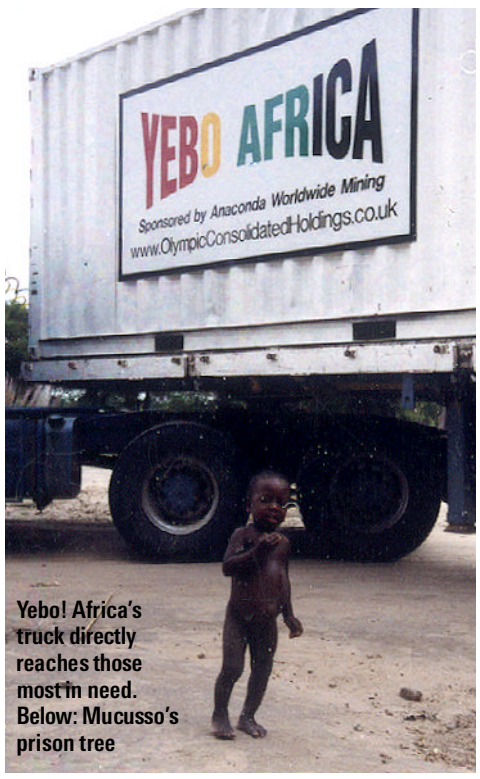
The kinder among us start feeding the horde of kids with our spare rations, risking a food riot but salving our consciences and filling their bellies. Soon everyone joins in distributing food. The trauma and depression of that first impression lasts for weeks after my return.

According to James Pryor, the civil war in Angola was "a right messy one". The front line would move twice a year every year, with the change in the seasons. As the rains came the bush would grow thick and so hide the rebel forces from their worst fear – the helicopter gunships of the Marxist government. ▶

▶ Then, as the dry season returned, the UNITA rebels would be exposed and forced to retreat. And so each year much of Angola would be overrun twice in each direction – each time by an army taking women for sex slaves and men and children to carry equipment and whatever else they needed before burning down the houses and slaughtering the cattle and land-mining the area.

As a result the stronger people travelled miles from their homes to escape the ever-moving front line and the weaker ones – the young and the old – simply went to live and die in the bush. Half of Angola's 14 million inhabitants are now displaced. They are slowly returning to their towns, which are mostly bombed flat and surrounded by mines, and attempting to rebuild them without tools or materials of even the simplest kind. Many Angolans have been bombed back into Stone Age conditions.

The following afternoon is spent unpacking the containers. It is an afternoon of spilled boxes, stolen bicycles, pizza-oven heat and watching crowds. Afterwards, three of us – Gavin the photographer, Rudi the driver and myself – walk down to the riverside and watch the most amazing sunset over the Okavango river. The sky fills with ripples of red. We have a smoke and watch the African sun disappear like a blood clot slipping down a plug hole.



Yebo! Africa's truck directly reaches those most in need. Below: Mucusso's prison tree

There's an ancient, hollowed tree. It was the town prison. We ask how many people would be put in there. 'Six, seven, eight,' says the local police chief, 'until they die'

We walk back up into town and straight into the most magical scene: the happiest thing I've ever seen in my life. The main road is full of dancing, laughing children. Toddlers, under-tens and teenagers with babies – all dancing in the street under a bubbling cloud. Blue, red, orange, white and pink all bouncing on the ends of bits of string or beaten up into the air or just sucked and cuddled. Every child has a balloon. It's like walking into a rave. Laughter burbles down the street like a happy river rushing to meet the sea. There is no debate. No minefield. Just kids with balloons, laughing like they're proud of their dental work. Laughing like imps.

Here there are none of the moral issues associated with aid: you can't sell it or steal it, watch it rot or inadvertently fuck up someone's traditional lifestyle with it, it's just joy. Most of these kids have never seen a balloon and to all a loud bang means gunfire, or worse. And then when the first one bursts the whole street jumps and bursts into laughter.

The next morning is the day of the big giveaway. Andy, the Essex reporter, and I climb up on the roof of the truck so we can watch the hippies do all the hard work. PJ and Rat and Nick and Dirk, who's a South African policeman (and very much *not* a hippy) have erected an enormous canvas awning and built counters and arranged a distribution system using skills that everyone, apart fromDirk, learnt at Glastonbury.

The whole village gathers round in a 500-strong semi-circle while a man with a clipboard, who appears to work for the local government, calls families over one at a time. Each gets a bag containing clothes, tools, utensils and food. The luckiest ones get the much prized bicycles.

Later I walk through the crowd and while at the front it appears as if people are pushing and shoving and that a riot is about to start, but all that's happening is that five rows back, the crowd looks on in wonder at what's given out.

Towards the end of the distribution, I see something which will stay with me for the rest of my life. In the dust under one of the counters are scattered maybe a dozen, maybe 18, grains of rice. A hollow-cheeked woman with a child strapped to her back kneels in the dirt after everyone else has drifted off. She scoops up the dirt in handfuls and collects it in a fold in her clothes so she can take it home to extract a teaspoon of raw rice from the pound or two of red dust.

In starvation, there is still a hierarchy. Some people have clean clothes and an air of superiority. They still live in huts made of metal but they maybe sell a few of the bottles of beer that occasionally make it to Mucusso by river or receive some money from the government for being a teacher, or a cop or administrator. The rest fight over the leftovers.

Later still a few of us take a walk down to the edge of town, being careful only to walk on the hardened white earth where countless lucky feet have cleared a path for us through the minefields. The town has a good atmosphere but the conditions are appalling. The atmosphere grows less intimidating the further we move away from the police compound, until right at the end of town where we can see an ancient tree. Its huge trunk is the circumference of a church tower and its deeply wrinkled bark has the texture of a vast elephant's leg. In the middle of this majestic wooden creature has been hacked a crude entrance so that its hollow interior is exposed, and slots have been carved in the wood on either side of the gaping wound so that metal bars can be fitted to fill the entrance. The whole tree reeks of death and pain. You don't have to believe in psychic energy to feel the bad atmosphere which permeates the area around it. Our simple question gets a shocking reply: this hollow tree was, "until recently" the town prison.

"How many people would you put in there?" we asked the police chief through Moses, our Angolan interpreter.

"Not me," he replied. "But the other people would have put in six, seven, eight people."

"How long would you put them in there for?"

"Until they die."

Two days later we are in Dirico. This time we slip across the border and use the rivers instead of the mined roads, moving quickly and unofficially like a true guerrilla army. We don't see another boat during our hour-long journey.

When we land at a long wooden landing stage it is clear we have a very hot and tricky job emptying a boat full of heavy equipment along a jetty 25 yards long made from round poles loosely lashed together. Then hordes of village kids appear. They seem quite different to the ones in Mucusso – not so initially blank and traumatised. They have the boat emptied in a trice and we set off back down the river to score more supplies and bring back the others.

On the return trip we all walk up the hill from the jetty into Dirico and under James' direction sit under a large tree with a chief, not a chief of police. Because Dirico sits atop a hill in a swamp it was "revved" ("revved" is South African Army slang for "blowing the shit out of") a lot during the war. But here the tribal structure held strong and the chief took his people out into the swamp, took them through the war and now has them working as a community once again. The old colonial Portuguese town square and ▶

▶ every other concrete building is, of course, roofless and pockmarked by heavy machine gun fire.An unexploded RPG shell sticks out of the side of the water tower like a lawn dart. But around the old town is a much healthier looking conurbation of mud huts than the squatter-camp squalor of Mucusso.

The aid distribution goes much smoother in Dirico. The chief calls upon the ten tribal elders who explain to him who needs what and when the distribution is finished quickly and efficiently, the whole village joins him in the sort of call and response African yodelling singing that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

On our way back in the flat-bottomed boat, Pryor is grinning. "You know what?" he says, the wind blowing his ponytail straight out behind him. "It feels amazing to be coming away from an African town, through scenery like this, knowing you've done something really good instead of being part of something really horrible."

He talks a little more about the principles of Guerrilla Aid. The key is local knowledge. As in war, so in peace: "The MPLA used to turn up at a village and just drag one guy out and threaten to shoot him if the village didn't tell them where the UNITA forces had gone," says Yebo! Africa's chief. "And that was completely useless because he either told you nothing so they had to shoot him, or he would tell you shit to save his skin and then all you've got is shit."

Now one of the foot soldiers of the Cold War has returned, using the same skills he had learned in the South African Army to bring aid to the people of Dirico and provide assistance instead of guns. It was local knowledge which told him that this place was accessible by water, bypassing the mines problem completely. It was this approach which sanctioned giving the boss man respect by sitting and listening to what he and his village wanted. It was this approach which involved personally presenting the chief with a typewriter, a bicycle and a tool set before his whole village. And it was his approach, the way of Guerrilla Aid, which enabled the people of Dirico and Mucusso to get 95 per cent of the aid which was collected for them in Britain. Otherwise, there would be a greater risk of losing a much higher proportion of the donations to administration and running costs – and then losing another percentage of the materials bought and donated to the chain of corruption and delay which would be the lot of anyone foolish or bureaucratic enough to bring their aid into the capital city of Luanda rather than just nipping across the border in a boat.

So far, this first aid run organised by Yebo! Africa is the only one, but already trips are being planned to take aid to the people of Sierra Leone, Tanzania and South Africa. It's a simple idea. We in the West have much we don't need. Lots of people would like it – in fact they really need it. Instead of throwing it away, we can give it to Yebo! Africa, who will risk their necks to get it to those who need it most. In a world of often ineffectual aid, tribes like Yebo! Africa may be the way ahead. GQ

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Yebo! Africa's first adventure was a success for all