

# Dutch 'safe zone' in Angola

by Joris van Wijk

The civil war that raged in Angola until 2001 displaced millions of people. From August 1998 until April 2001 the Netherlands granted temporary status to all Angolans seeking asylum. Over roughly the same period, some 11,000 Angolans – of whom more than half were unaccompanied minors – applied for asylum in the Netherlands. None were forcibly repatriated.

The fact that few returned encouraged friends and family back home to believe the Netherlands to be a tolerant, welcoming country. It seemed that young Angolans could travel to the Netherlands, be granted temporary status and be able to study, merely by virtue of coming from war-torn Angola. Coming from the province of Cabinda, for example, where fighting was ongoing, strengthened their claim, as did being politically active for the UNITA rebels.

Dutch asylum policies seemed particularly welcoming to unaccompanied minors. Firstly, minors benefited from better reception facilities, including access to education. Asylum seekers over 18 with temporary status did not have access to language lessons or general education as they were expected eventually to return home. Secondly, the Dutch courts stated that unaccompanied Angolan children could not be repatriated as Angola lacked 'adequate reception facilities' – ie there were no safe orphanages in Angola to accommodate repatriated children.

## Creating a 'safe zone'

In response to the increasing number of asylum claims by unaccompanied Angolan minors the Ministry of Justice decided to finance the modernisation and expansion of the *Mulemba* orphanage in Luanda, thereby creating the required 'adequate reception facility'. The Dutch Minister of Immigration and Integration officially

opened the orphanage in September 2003 and the Immigration Department started repatriating Angolan minors. By January 2005 more than 600 Angolans – including many unaccompanied minors – had returned to Angola.

Strikingly, only one of these children is known to have taken shelter in the orphanage; most preferred to seek out members of their (extended) family. The project, however, is considered a success by the Dutch authorities. Unaccompanied minors from Angola applying for asylum

can now legitimately be denied temporary (or any other) status because of the existence of the orphanage. Other European countries – including Belgium and Switzerland – have taken note and are considering funding a number of beds in the *Mulemba* orphanage in order to create their own safe zones.

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*Unaccompanied minors, Luanda, Angola*