

## Miss Landmine: The beauty pageant with a difference (Angola)

---

**Before her death, Princess Diana brought the devastation caused by landmines to the world's attention. Miss Landmine is the brainchild of a theatre director who wanted to give these women the chance to celebrate their inner and outer beauty.**

(27.05.2008)

Emilia Luzia is hoping desperately that her ex-husband will see her on television tonight. Her hair is in large white rollers in preparation for what she says is set to be the most important night of her life. We are in CineTropico, a huge nightclub in the centre of Angola's capital, Luanda. As guests start arriving for Miss Landmine, none of the 18 contestants 'one representing each of Angola's provinces' seem particularly fazed by all the attention. One woman carries a baby on her back; another is nine months pregnant. All have been maimed in landmine explosions.

Angola has more landmine victims than most other countries - millions of mines were planted across the country during a bloody 27-year civil war that ended in 2002. Precise figures of landmine casualties are not known, but hundreds have been killed, and it's estimated as many as 80,000 have been injured. Despite an extensive demining program since the end of the war, Angola remains one of the most mined countries in Africa, and an estimated 300-400 people have been injured by mines every year since the war ended.

Four years ago Morten Traavik, a Norwegian theatre director, travelled to Angola for the first time and was struck by three things: the extent of the landmine problem, a strong desire to do something to help its victims and the Angolan love of the beauty pageant. So he came up with the concept of Miss Landmine, the first ever pageant for landmine victims. Its motto is: 'Everyone has the right to be beautiful,' and it is designed to restore self-esteem in women who have been isolated and marginalised. But the project came up against a lot of opposition - every NGO that he approached turned the project down, with one labelling the concept a 'freak show'.

Eventually, Traavik secured funding and support from the Angolan government and Norway's Arts Council. 'Angola makes \$30 billion [about £15.2 billion] from oil revenues each year,' he says. 'The Angolan Ministry of Health needs to start taking full responsibility for the rehabilitation of its own citizens.' All the contestants are being paid around £100 a day by the government to take part, and will be allowed to keep the dresses and jewellery they wear. The winner will become an international ambassador for landmine survivors; Traavik plans to take the Miss Landmine event to Cambodia next year, and then to stage a worldwide Miss Landmine, possibly in 2015.

Since arriving in Luanda two days ago from a small village in Angola's Bié province, Emilia has been flicking through as many women's magazines as possible and rehearsing her catwalk moves. Walking with difficulty on an ancient pair of crutches, she's determined to win, though she denies it hotly. 'I am happy to be representing my region and all disabled people,' she says, batting her eyelashes as a photographer comes near. 'But it is also good to feel special and glamorous. This is the first time I've worn such nice clothes.'

In a sky-blue, silk evening dress and white sash, 26-year-old Sandra Tichika sits on a mat, breastfeeding her baby, with what remains of her left leg tucked beneath her. 'I can't recall the day it happened. I was a little girl,' she tells me. 'I only remember that I was following my mother, who'd gone to the well to fetch water, and that it was raining. Then I stood on the mine.' There is no transport in Sandra's tiny village so she had to be carried on foot and, by the time they reached the hospital a week later, Sandra's leg was so badly infected that it had to be amputated just below the hip bone.

She is fiercely proud and independent, without a shred of self-pity. When told that the pageant's critics have claimed that it objectifies women, she laughs: 'Most of the ladies here are from small villages: we struggle, we are isolated, yet here we are being noticed and accepted - how bad can that be?'

One of the judges, Quartim Matongueiro of mine clearance organisation Norwegian People's Aid, calls the pageant a 'window of opportunity for all disabled people. Our government needs to stop seeing amputees as broken people. They are the ones who can develop Angola.'

The pageant starts two-and-a-half hours late, when Angola's First Lady, Ana Paula dos Santos, sweeps in, surrounded by an entourage of press. For a few moments all eyes are on her and her table companion, the current Miss Angola, before a power cut throws the auditorium into darkness. A minute later, the lights are back. To a fanfare of drums and clapping, Luiza Miguel Adão Gaspar from Angola's Bengo district limps carefully down the catwalk resplendent in a long orange and yellow gown. Her face is disfigured and she is blind in one eye. Her elation at being on the red carpet is palpable; she can hardly stop laughing. She waves to the crowd and they roar with support.

Excitement rises as each contestant takes her turn. When Emilia appears, she moves as seductively as her crutches will allow her, to tremendous cheers from the crowd. She tells the compère her plans for the future and how she dreams of opening a school for landmine survivors in her province. 'Now all the country is going to know who I am,' she cries when she returns backstage. 'My ex-husband is not going to believe it!'

Then, after the judges have seen them all and taken time to deliberate, they announce that the winner is 31-year-old Augusta Huríca from Luanda. Emilia, who is clearly devastated, gives a brave smile as Dos Santos places the crown on Augusta's head. Augusta's 'eloquence, grace and vision' for the future role of Miss Landmine has most impressed the judges. She wants the government to set up a fund for disabled people, and for all amputees to be given quality prosthetics. As part of her prize, she was measured for a custom-made artificial limb.

'I wanted to die when I was injured. But God gave me courage to keep going,' says Augusta. 'All the women here tonight were so beautiful and happy. Perhaps the government will take notice of us now.'

### Landmines: The Facts

Landmines are explosives that can be set off remotely or triggered when a person or animal comes near them, causing severe injury or death.

1992 saw the launch of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. In 1997, the organisation and its chief spokesperson, Jody Williams, jointly received the Nobel Peace Prize.

That same year, Princess Diana brought the issue to global attention when she called for an international ban on landmines during a visit to Angola with the International Red Cross to meet victims. Diana's involvement was seen as incredibly controversial because, at that time, the British army was still using landmines.

Today, at least 99 countries are affected by mined areas, and 13 countries still produce mines, including the US, Russia and China. As of last year, there were 473,000 mine survivors in the world.

The campaign's greatest success came in 1999 when the Ottawa Treaty, banning the production and use of mines, came into force, signed by many countries.

At last year's Concert for Diana at Wembley, Princes Harry and William met landmine victim Sandra Tichika (see p99 of the July 2008 issue of Marie Claire), who had been visited by Princess Diana in Angola in 1997.

Twiggy and Heather Mills also support the campaign to get every country to agree to a landmine ban. Twiggy says: 'It's hard to see how anyone can fail to care about children and animals being blown up by landmines.'

Von: 28.5.2008, www.marieclaire.co.uk, by Jonathan Torgovnik

<<< zurück zu: News

---

