

The meeting point



As peace breaks out in Angola, Tim Hetherington witnesses a war-torn nation searching for its missing families. **Keith Wilson** hears how he photographed a crowded yet lonely meeting point



The time September, 2002

The place Luanda, Angola

The event Every Friday in Luanda, the capital of Angola, hundreds of people gather at the city's Independence Place, most clutching a photograph of a relative who disappeared during the civil war that ended with a ceasefire last April. They want to find their missing relatives, but spreading the message requires media publicity, so when Tim Hetherington turns up with his Rolleiflex he finds himself acting as a medium for their hopes.

IT WAS AN incredible sight,' says London-based photographer Tim Hetherington, 'to see all these people congregating, most with pictures, queuing to be interviewed for TV.' The subsequent programme, called Meeting Point, broadcasts the messages of people looking for their missing relatives, holding a photograph up to camera. For many, an old creased and dog-eared print is the only proof they have left of their loved-one's existence.

A year earlier, Tim had flown to New York a week after 11 September 2001 to photograph another city in shock, searching for the missing victims of the World Trade Centre. There, photographs were posted all over New York, with names, telephone numbers, and personal details. Now, in another continent, there was a similar undertaking to trace missing relatives.

'There seemed to be so many of them,' he recalls. 'People were just coming up to me wanting their pictures taken and to have their stories heard.' The first story of many he was to hear that Friday was of Miguel Kiala, the subject of the old

photograph in the main image on this page. Kiala disappeared in 1995 when his car was stopped and attacked by UNITA rebels, the CIA-backed force that was trying to topple the government.

Tim chose the middle frame to print because 'this torn and tattered print is the last thing we have of him. Originally, I wanted to print the frame above it, but I didn't know how to take the story – whether to concentrate on the people who are missing, or on the people who are left behind to pick up the pieces.' Because so many people queued for his camera, he limited himself to three frames per person. By the end of seven hours of shooting and interviewing he had photographed more than 60 people.

It is not certain how many people are missing in Angola, but most

authorities and agencies say it is more than 10,000, possibly as high as 70,000. Tim has barely scratched the surface.

After flying back to London, the train journey from the airport was interrupted by a PA announcement for a minute's silence to commemorate the anniversary of 11 September. 'It made me really angry,' Tim says. 'Don't get me wrong, I have sympathy for all the victims, but it seemed it [the commemorative silence] was just because they were Americans. After what I had just seen in Angola, it depressed me a lot.'

None of his pictures from Angola has been published, but with his pictures from New York and Luanda, Tim is now working on an ongoing 'Missing' project. The difficulty will be knowing when to stop. ○

