Angola's capital city Luanda has hosted this “Sao Silvestre” New Year's Eve race since 1954, with only two years - 1961 and 1978 - forfeiting the race date. It is an heroic record, given that the country was engulfed by a war of liberation from 1954 until 1974, and thereafter by a civil war backed by foreign regimes which lasted until 2002.

But the Angolan government is now basking in new oil-fuelled prosperity and, with government backing, the race can attract some of the best runners in the world. Like Haile Gebrselassie in the 2011 edition, and this year five-time World Half Marathon Champion Zersenay Tadese. London and New York Marathon champion Priscah Jeptoo headed the field in the women’s race.

They do battle with each other on the roads of Luanda for a share of the US$147,000 prize money, and in the process provide a spectacle that enhances the New Year celebrations for the locals. There is also a separate mass participation event in which 1300 participated.

The race starts at 17:00 on New Year’s Eve, but there is more to come. The next day an international track meeting is held that gives the speedsters an opportunity to reclaim status against the marathon types who tend to take the spoils on the hills and in the heat of the road race. Failure to compete in the track event results in 50% retention of any monies won in the headline Sao Silvestre road race. This innovative thinking by the Angolan Federation treats appreciative locals and media to the opportunity of two days of world-class athletics.

Marathon specialist Stanley Biwott adopted a perfect race strategy to take victory in 32°C heat and 52% humidity. The 27-year-old Kenyan pulled a world class field up the initial rise from City Hall, before being content to let others take over on the steeper climbs of the first three kilometres.

Continued on page 19
The race was very competitive. I knew many of the guys were faster so I had to get to the front,” said Biwott, who has a personal best of 27:50 for 10km. With over 30 athletes capable of breaking 29 minutes for 10km it was no surprise that there were still 15 of them contesting the lead as the pack hit the flat.

Having crashed through 5km in 14:36, the lead group was reduced to seven when they hit the downhill section. Only four remained when they reached Luanda’s newly refurbished beachfront, which provides a stark contrast to many of the city’s boulevards that still bear the scars of war-torn years.

Yenew Getahun tackled the wind head-on with Edwin Kipyego and two-time winner Tadese tucking into his slipstream and Biwott content to bring up the rear of the group.

“In the last two kilometres I knew that I could win,” said Biwott. “I’m pleased with the time because it’s hilly (at the start), it’s hot and the wind was tough along the beachfront. We had to push very hard.”

One by one the competition fell off as Biwott wound up the pace around the final twists and turns to the stadium, where he opened up a two-metre advantage over Getahun in the sprint to the line.

Despite the conditions seven runners broke 29 minutes, while the mass continued to stream over the line for the next two hours, in celebration of completing the distance.

New York marathon winner Priscah Jeptoo started more conservatively, staying behind Pauline Njeru and Ruti Aga, but took the lead before passing the memorial to women who gave their lives fighting in the 1961–69 war for independence at 4km. Jeptoo then pushed on to win in a time 21 seconds faster than she had run the previous year.

“It was very difficult because of the [high standard of] competition but I knew the route. I planned to start slowly and then to gradually increase the pace,” said Jeptoo. “The time was ok. I can’t expect to run faster on this course. But it’s a good race and the course suits me.”

Celebration and enjoyment rather than speed is the essence of the event for locals. The race remains a focus for festivities on São Silvestre day, which commemorates the death of the Catholic saint, a 4th-century Pope, who died on 31 December.

A third of Angola’s population live in Luanda. Over half the population suffer unsafe drinking water and electricity shortages as they strive to rebuild after decades of uncertainty. Angola produces eight million carats of diamonds every year, making it the world’s fourth-largest diamond producing country by value. Offshore oil is refined in the city in a facility that was repeatedly targeted prior to 2002 before the country stabilised.

As Angola rebuilds the race continues to be a focus for celebration and participation. Crowds throng the route, particularly the uphill sections, cheering, supporting and encouraging aspiring local runners who try to emulate the elite as they charge the climbs.

The race included women for the first time in 1984, but even before that it had become a beacon of relief, celebration and hope for the New Year. Although the circumstances have changed the tradition remains, with people from all communities rubbing shoulders on the capital’s streets or draped off the bridges shouting support for the runners.

As evening falls thousands proceed to the corniche to see in the New Year amongst bands, light shows, dancing and fireworks. Parties continue throughout the night. In 2015 the race will enter its seventh decade. For distance running enthusiasts there are few better places in which to celebrate the turning of the old year into the new.