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Angola's Leila is Miss Universe

SAO PAULO: Newly crowned Miss Universe Leila Lopes hopes her victory will allow her to assist her native Angola further escape its history of war and impoverishment and said she plans to focus on combating HIV around the globe.

Speaking in a timid voice early Tuesday shortly after taking the crown in South America's largest city, the 25-year-old Lopes said that "as Miss Angola I've already done a lot to help my people."

"I've worked with various social causes. I work with poor kids, I work in the fight against HIV. I work to protect the elderly and I have to do everything that my country needs," she said. "I think now as Miss Universe I will be able to do much more."

Responding to questions, Lopes said that she has never had cosmetic surgery of any kind and that her three tips for beauty were to get a lot of sleep, use sun block even when it's not sunny and to drink lots of water. She said her smile was her best weapon in the competition.

Asked about racism in light of the fact that she's one of the few blacks ever crowned Miss Universe, Lopes said that "any racist needs to seek help. It's not normal in the 21st century to think in that way."

Lopes is Angola's first winner. She beat out 88 other competitors to win the title during the 60th anniversary of the world's biggest beauty pageant. She replaces last year's winner, Ximena Navarrete of Mexico.

She deftly handled the interview question that is asked of the remaining top five contestants. She was questioned about what physical trait she would change if she could.

"Thank God I'm very satisfied with the way God created me and I wouldn't change a thing," Lopes said. "I consider myself a woman endowed with inner beauty. I have acquired many wonderful principles from my family and I intend to follow these for the rest of my life."

The first runner-up was 23-year-old Olesia Stefanko of Ukraine and the second runner-up was Priscila Machado of Brazil. The third was Miss Philippines and the fourth Miss China.

Contestants spent the past three weeks in

Sao Paulo, trying to learn samba dance steps, visiting impoverished children and kicking a football around for cameras as the Miss Universe pageant came to Brazil for the first time.

Despite battling against a home country favorite, Lopes won over the audience, speaking in the shared language of Portuguese. Angola, like Brazil, is a former Portuguese colony.

"She captivated the crowd and we were all behind her," said Brazilian Natalie Bursztyn, 20, who was in the crowd inside Credicard Hall where the event took place. "It was great that the judges also saw what the fans saw and gave her the crown. Her dress was beautiful and she knew exactly what to say when they asked her the question about her looks."

Another fan in the audience, Carolina Rocha, said Lopes' win was "well deserved, we were cheering for her all along. Her smile and her friendliness was what set her apart from the others. She also answered her question very well, that likely helped her a lot."

U.S. broadcast journalist Connie Chung was one of the celebrity judges, and said before the competition that she was taking the contest seriously.

"I know my job and I'll be tough, but fair," Chung said. "You have to keep in mind that these women are not objects just to be looked at. They're to be taken seriously. I want to choose somebody I take seriously and the world takes seriously, too."

Paula Shugart, president of the Miss Universe organisation, was hyped for the night.

"It's our 60th anniversary, it's a very big show," she said. "We're anticipating close to a billion viewers from around the world."

Shugart said it was fitting the globe's biggest beauty pageant be held in Brazil at this

time, as the nation prepares to host some major events in the coming years.

"I don't think there is any doubt in the rest of the world's mind that Brazil is the place, between hosting the Olympics and hosting the World Cup," she said. "I love the fact we're going to kick it off. I always say we're the 'World

Cup' of beauty."

The contestants must never have been married or had children and must be at least 18 years of age and under 27 years of age by Feb. 1 of the competition year.

The pageant, hosted by NBC "Today" anchor Natalie Morales and the Bravo network's Andy Cohen, was broadcast live on NBC and distributed to about 170 countries. The contest is co-owned by Donald Trump and NBC, and the celebrity judges included Chung and two prominent Brazilians, supermodel Isabeli Fontana and Indy race car driver Helio Castroneves.

Morales, who is half Brazilian, said that "what's most important is for the women to be beautiful inside and out."

For Cohen, the task of hosting was an easy one.

"It's a fun job. All I have to do is stand there, smile and scream the names of countries," he said.

Sharply dressed women and men jostled for chances to have their photos taken with stars on the red carpet. Some travelled from across the globe to support contestants.

Jehona Dreshaj, 17, arrived from Kosovo to cheer on her sister, Aferdita Dreshaj, who is representing the European country.

"It doesn't really matter the outcome, she is already a winner in our eye and we are so proud of her," she said. "This has been an incredible experience for her and for all of us. It's great for her to be representing our country in an event like this"

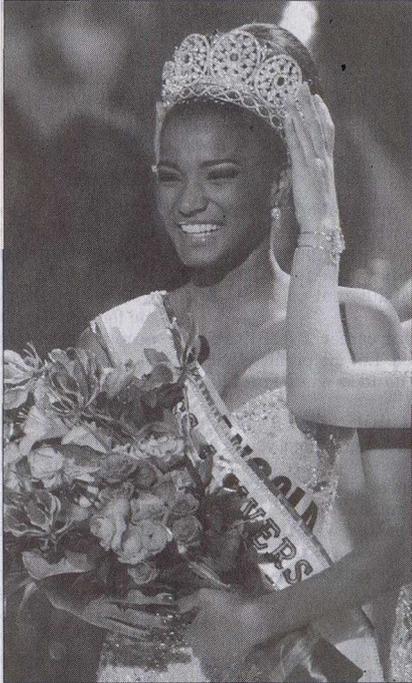
There have been no headline-grabbing gaffes going into this year's competition, as opposed to past years that have seen controversies of various stripes. The show itself went off without a hitch.

Some of the contestants have complained to the local news media about the size of bikinis used in some photo shoots, with Miss Mexico Karin Ontiveros saying they were "very small."

That was enough to draw chuckles in Brazil, where women from all walks of life, not just beauty queens, sport barely there swimwear on beaches throughout the country. — AP

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Leila Lopes is crowned Miss Universe 2011



The top finalists at the Miss Universe pageant, (L-R) Miss Ukraine Olesia Stefanko, Miss Brazil Priscila Machado and Miss Angola Leila Lopes wait for the final announcement during the pageant in Sao Paulo, Brazil.,