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ANGOLA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR INVESTIGATIONS AT MASS GRAVE SITE.

Amnesty International is calling for a thorough investigation by independent forensic and other suitably qualified experts on a mass burial ground, reportedly containing the remains of at least 60 skeletons, apparently victims of deliberate and arbitrary killings, which was discovered by a mine-clearing team working near Soyo in north-western Angola.

The de-mining team found these remains near Kwanda, formerly a site for operations to support the oil industry in the Soyo area. Local residents have said that the victims were probably among those abducted by the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA), National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, which occupied the area in May 1993 and held it for about a year. War had resumed when UNITA contested the fairness of the elections in September 1992. It ended in early 1995 after a new peace agreement was signed.

A group of members of parliament led by a member of the ruling Movimento Popular da Libertação de Angola (MPLA), People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola, and including members of four other parties, are travelling to the area on Saturday 27 July.

"The parliamentary delegation and the United Nations should ensure that a thorough and independent investigation is held and conducted in accordance with minimum international standards as laid down in the UN Guidelines for the Conduct of UN Inquiries into Allegations of Massacres," Amnesty International said.

These standards require, among other things, that those conducting the inquiry are chosen for their recognized impartiality, independence and competence; that the commission should have adequate powers and resources to carry out its task; that advance notices should invite people to present evidence and explain how witnesses will be protected. Finally the commission should issue a public report containing its findings, conclusions and recommendations in full.

Among the remains were skulls with holes suggesting shots to the head, the bones of children and articles of women's clothing and government police uniforms. The site is in a swamp near the delta of the Zaire river and is heavily mined. Local residents and journalists believe that the area contains other burial sites.

During the war thousands of unarmed civilians suspected of supporting the opposing side were deliberately and arbitrarily killed by both the government and UNITA and there are other mass graves in various parts of the country. Such killings are in direct contravention of international treaties to which the government is a party and Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions which apply to both parties to the conflict. None of those responsible have been brought to justice - they are protected by amnesty laws.

“People have a right to know the truth - only a full report by an impartial commission of inquiry will reveal it. There should be such investigations in other areas where massacres are said to have taken place. Unless the truth is told it will be difficult to achieve reconciliation in Angola,” Amnesty International said. “The UNAVEM III (United Nations Angola Verification Mission III) has an obligation to ensure that the Angolan Government complies with its international obligations.”

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