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PUBLIC STATEMENT

Amnesty International backs United Nations' call for a continued UN human rights presence in Angola

As Angola descends into conflict, amidst fears of a new round of large-scale human rights violations, Amnesty International today welcomed a UN Security Council Presidential Statement urging all concerned to cooperate with the UN humanitarian and human rights activities, which "help to lay a basis for lasting peace and national reconciliation".

The statement, issued on 21 January 1999, also emphasized the importance of "a continued multidisciplinary presence of the United Nations under the direction of a Representative of the Secretary-General in Angola".

Amnesty International is now calling on all Security Council members to ensure a continued human rights presence in Angola and to guarantee the necessary political and financial support for it to function effectively.

The human rights organization is also urging all parties to the conflict to provide access to areas under their control and to guarantee the security and freedom of UN personnel. So far, the UN has made an important contribution to the protection and promotion of human rights in Angola, and must therefore be allowed to continue this vital work even if it is unable to maintain a presence in areas affected by the fighting.

As recommended by the UN Secretary-General on 17 January, UN human rights officers' tasks should include providing assistance to strengthen justice systems, gathering information about human rights violations, and helping to develop the capacity of local non-governmental organizations to promote and protect human rights.

A renewed commitment to a continuing UN human rights presence in Angola would demonstrate the international community's conviction that human rights protection is always essential -- in times of political crisis as well as in peace time.

The UN Observer Mission in Angola, MONUA, whose mandate is due to expire on 26 February, can no longer fulfil its original function due to the collapse of the peace process, particularly after heavy fighting resumed between the government and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in December 1998. However, the recent Presidential Statement reaffirmed the UN's concern that its operation should remain in Angola to provide humanitarian assistance, and that it should include a human rights presence.

In his 17 January report the UN Secretary-General noted that grave human rights abuses had been committed by both sides, including indiscriminate shelling by UNITA and other violations by both government and UNITA combatants.

Amnesty International shares his concern about the human rights situation in Angola and has recorded persistent and unchecked abuse of human rights throughout the peace process since it began in 1991. During 1998, the organization received reports of human rights abuses in contested areas, including deliberate and arbitrary killings of civilians, by both government security forces and UNITA troops.

In cities and other areas under government control there is increasing restriction of the rights to free expression and association. There have also been reports of deliberate and arbitrary killings in areas under UNITA control. These abuses continue to fuel the mistrust between the two parties and to undermine the quest for peace.

Amnesty International strongly believes that continued monitoring and protection of human rights in Angola is a crucial aspect of the search for lasting peace. There can be no peace unless those involved in the conflict begin to show respect for all human beings' right to life and physical integrity, as set out in international humanitarian and human rights law.

Background

The peace process in Angola crumbled during 1998 as all contact between the government and UNITA ceased. Isolated clashes escalated into heavy fighting in December as government aircraft attacked UNITA strongholds in the central highlands. UNITA, which had acquired new weapons, encircled and shelled the cities of Malange and Kuito. There was also fighting in other areas. UN personnel have been threatened and in late December and early January two UN planes were shot down near Huambo killing 23 people. Since November, more than 200,000 civilians have been forced to flee because of the fighting.

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