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ANGOLA: UN WITHDRAWAL COULD LEAD TO ANOTHER HUMAN RIGHTS
DISASTER

On United Nations (UN) Day, Amnesty International warned member governments member that Angola could witness another human rights catastrophe unless measures to protect and promote human rights are fully integrated into the peace process.

“As the peace process draws to a close in Angola, it is vital that steps are taken now to ensure that human rights are protected,” Amnesty International said. “Without this, the peace process will amount to nothing, and the months and years spent by thousands of people trying to lay the base for reconciliation will have been wasted.”

The United Nations Angola Verification Mission (UNAVEM III) is due to pull out of Angola in February 1997, after two years spent trying to implement the peace accords signed between the government and armed opposition in 1994. Amnesty International is putting forward recommendations to all parties involved in the Angolan peace process to ensure that human rights are protected after the withdrawal.

“Lasting peace cannot be achieved while each side fears a repetition of the mass killings and other human rights abuses which occurred with total impunity during the conflict. Both sides have bound themselves to protecting human rights; they should now transform their words into deeds.”

Amnesty International is calling for the establishment of a body of experts to take over the human rights work begun by the UNAVEM III Human Rights Unit -- the body which has been primarily involved in human rights protection and promotion in the country -- and which is due to pull out in February. Its replacement should be impartial, independent and competent, and provided with adequate funding to carry out its work.

The organization is urging international governmental organizations and aid donors to provide financial and other support for human rights initiatives. The UN Security Council should ensure that the peace process is not considered complete until adequate protection for human rights.

Both the government of President José Eduardo dos Santos and the *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA), National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, led by Jonas Malheiro Savimbi, are attempting to build a Government of National Unity and Reconciliation in a context of bitterness, mistrust, and lack of accountability on both sides.

Amnesty International is concerned that if human rights safeguards are not included as a central plank of the new government's mandate, the world could see a repetition of events which followed previous attempts to implement peace. After a previous UN mission was reduced in 1992 and the subsequent elections, mass killings resumed, followed by sieges and aerial bombardments of cities which caused mass starvation and deaths. Both sides were guilty of serious human rights violations.

During the fighting, government forces took hundreds of civilians into custody, and shot others before burying them in shallow graves. One mass grave is reported to be at Morro da Luz, a steep ravine in the Samba area of Luanda, where suspected UNITA members were taken and then pushed off.

UNITA forces also deliberately targeted civilians -- in one attack, scores of people were killed in Gombe in April 1993. One victim was Matias Inácio da Silva Neto, a member of the MPLA Provincial Committee, who was reportedly buried up to his neck and left to die. UNITA soldiers have also forced villages to watch public executions. Other punishments included tying victims upside-down to the trunk of a tree and leaving them overnight.

Both the government and UNITA have deliberately killed internal dissidents - people who opposed or were suspected of opposing their respective leaders' policies. Most newspapers and radio stations are under government or UNITA control: the rest are intimidated into self-censorship. Journalists who criticize the either side have received death threats, been demoted, or lost their jobs.

Very few of the security officials responsible for human rights violations have been arrested and fewer have been prosecuted. Pervasive corruption compounds the problem, as arrest or prosecution can be evaded through bribery or the intervention of powerful friends.

“The establishment of an independent criminal judicial system, perceived by all sides to be impartial, should be made an imperative. And, both sides could help ensure that the peace process is successful by taking immediate steps to ensure that any of their forces committing human rights abuses are brought to justice.” Amnesty International said.

“What is encouraging in Angola is that many people, particularly in non-governmental organizations, the legal and teaching professions, religious groups and political parties, are keen to carry out human rights promotion as they recognize that reconciliation is impossible without respect for human rights,” the organization said.

“If Angola's peace is to last beyond three years, it is vital that the government, UNITA and the international community supports these groups and recognises that their responsibility for the peace process does not end with the UNAVEM III withdrawal. February 1997 should mark the beginning of the real peace process in Angola.”

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