

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## Angola: Stop the Continued Harassment, Intimidation and Closure of Human Rights Organizations

As Angolans go to the polls in the country's first legislative election in 16 years, Amnesty International today called on the Angolan government to stop harassing and intimidating human rights activists, and closing down human rights organisations in the country.

The organization said that the crackdown on the activities of human rights activists is very troubling, especially as Angola is preparing for its second-ever presidential election.

In recent years human rights activists in Angola have faced a hostile environment. Government officials often threaten to ban human rights organisations. The most recent case will shortly be decided by the Constitutional Court and is an attempt by the government to ban the Association for Justice Peace and Democracy (AJPD). The case against AJPD comes just months after authorities officially closed the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Angola and almost two years after the banning of Mpalabanda (*Associação Cívica de Cabinda*).

In 2007 four prominent human rights organizations in the country received threats of closure. The Director of the Angolan Government's Technical Unit for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (UTCAH) made statements accusing the organizations of using human rights as a cover for breaking the law and threatened to close them.

Amnesty International considers the harassment, intimidation and closure of human rights organizations in the country an infringement of the guarantees of freedom of association, assembly and expression contained in Angolan national law and international human rights treaties and standards. These treaties and standards include the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), both of which Angola has ratified, as well as the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, commonly known as the United Nations (UN) Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

Amnesty International is concerned that the intimidation and closures are occurring at a time when the country is involved in its first elections in 16 years and therefore at a time when the participation of human rights activists in civic affairs is critical.

International human rights law stipulates that no restrictions should be placed on the exercise of the right to freedom of association, other than those prescribed by law and strictly necessary in the interest of national security, public safety, public order, public health and morals or the protection of the rights and freedom of others. While Amnesty International recognises the government's right to restrict the operations of organizations in the circumstances mentioned above, the organization urges it to ensure that this is done only when strictly necessary and in accordance with international human rights law and standards.

The organization urges the Angolan authorities to respect, promote and protect the work of these human rights organizations and the human rights defenders and activists working in them. The authorities should ensure that human rights activists are free to carry out their activities, without interference. Amnesty International reminds the Angolan authorities of their responsibility to take

appropriate steps to implement the United Nations (UN) Declaration on Human Rights Defenders in accordance with the Kigali Declaration adopted by the African Union (AU) Ministerial Conference on Human Rights in May 2003.

Amnesty International further reminds the Angolan government of its voluntary pledge, made in terms of its election to the UN Human Rights Council, to protect and promote human rights at the national level. The organization calls upon the Angolan government to fulfil its pledge by protecting the work of human rights defenders in the country and bringing an end to the intimidation, harassment and closures of human rights organizations.

### **Background**

In June 2006 the government of Angola instituted a case in the Provincial Court of Cabinda, based on the Law of Associations of May 1991 (*Lei das Associações de Maio de 1991*), to ban Mpalabanda (*Associação Cívica de Cabinda*). The government alleged that Mpalabanda incited violence and hatred. It also accused Mpalabanda of carrying out political activities rather than being a civil society organization. On 20 July 2006 the Court decided to ban the organization. There was no mention in the judgement that Mpalabanda promoted violence and hatred. Nor were any of the cited witnesses called to give evidence to this effect. Mpalabanda was the only human rights organization working in the Province of Cabinda at the time.

The harassment and intimidation of human rights organizations continued into 2007, when the Director General of UTCAH announced in a meeting with national and international NGOs based in Angola that the government would soon cease the activities of NGOs without a social impact for the population or for the executive. He later accused four prominent human rights organizations - the Association for Justice, Peace and Democracy (AJPD); *Mãos Livres*; the Angolan branch of the Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa, the Open Society Foundation; and the local housing rights organization, SOS-Habitat of alleging human rights violations of the citizens to justify their activities while actually carrying out actions contrary to the law. He also accused them of inciting people to react, even violently at times, against governmental institutions and authorities and threatened to ban them.

In April 2008 the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Angola revealed that it had been requested to close its representation in the country. The office was closed at the end of May 2008, three months before the first legislative elections in the country in 16 years.

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