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Angola: Targeting of journalists

Since the resumption of full-scale war in December 1998, the Angolan authorities have increasingly used legal procedures to arrest, question and intimidate journalists with the intention of silencing criticism, Amnesty International said in a new report published today.

"The abuse of legal proceedings for political ends violates international human rights law, Amnesty International said. "Any journalist or individual imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of expression in a non-violent way would be considered a prisoner of conscience."

The report examines attempts by the government to censor the media but does not address the issue in those areas under the control of *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA). In UNITA controlled areas freedom of expression is practically non-existent.

Since January 1999, some 20 journalists, most of whom worked for privately-owned radios and newspapers, have been briefly detained for questioning by police concerning possible charges including defamation, slander or crimes against the security of the state.

Charges levelled against journalists by the authorities are often broadly formulated so as to make them difficult to rebut. The government claims that some media reports relating to the on-going conflict have endangered public order or security or the good name of the state. However no state of exception has been declared and no exceptional measures to restrict the right to freedom of expression have been imposed in law.

Nevertheless, the authorities regularly invoke laws, including the press law of 1991 and a security law of 1978, in a manner that contravenes not only Angola's constitution but also several treaties to which Angola is party, including, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Albano Custódio, a *Rádio Ecclesia* correspondent in Kuito, Bié province, in central Angola, and a VoA reporter, Aniceto dos Santos, were questioned by police on 25 August about a report of UNITA's shelling of Kuito, the provincial capital. According to reports, the Bié police claimed that the broadcast could spread panic in the city and prevent humanitarian aid flights from landing at the airport.

"The right to freedom of information is essential to enable Angolans to know what is really happening in their country," the organization said. "It will allow them to contribute to the resolution of the crisis in a meaningful way."

"Restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and information beyond the limits permitted under international law only serves to hide and therefore to encourage other human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law," the organization added.

While the use of legal proceedings against journalists is a new trend, violence against journalists is a pattern which has been emerging over the years.

On 13 May 1999, the *Reuters* correspondent in Angola, Lara Pawson, was assaulted by three men in Luanda, the capital. One of the men held her by the face and threatened to harm her if she continued to publish reports critical of the government. He told her to remember that "Angola belongs to President Eduardo dos Santos".

"At the same time, the authorities are continuing to fail to protect the physical integrity of journalists and to investigate the cases of those who receive death threats or have been physically assaulted or murdered," the human rights organisation added.

"The government must immediately end this culture of violence against journalists and ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice."

Amnesty International calls on the Angolan government to amend its legislation in accordance with international human rights standards.

"No restrictions on freedom of expression or information on the ground of national security should be imposed unless the government can show that the restriction is prescribed in law and is necessary to provide a legitimate national security interest."
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For more information, please call the press office at Amnesty International in London on + 44 171 413 5566. You can also visit our website: <http://www.amnesty.org>