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ANGOLA: HUMAN RIGHTS SHOULD BE TOP OF UNITED NATIONS AGENDA

NEW YORK -- As the United Nations (UN) Security Council meets to discuss the final stages of the Angolan peace process, Amnesty International reiterated its call on the UN to ensure that human rights are at the forefront of its agenda on Angola.

The United Nations Angola Verification Mission (UNAVEM III) which is overseeing the peace agreement of 1994 is planning to withdraw its 6,500 troops by February 1997. Although it is probable that some form of UN presence will remain beyond that date, so far a suitable and effective mechanism to protect human rights after the withdrawal has not been established.

“Human rights abuses by both sides over the years have led to a profound mistrust,” Amnesty International said. “Without adequate human rights protection, there could be a new wave of deliberate and arbitrary killings of civilians.”

“In late 1992 the first attempt to bring peace to Angola shattered, resulting in the killing of many hundreds of people. The lack of human rights safeguards at that time contributed to these deaths, and it cannot be stressed enough that at this very delicate stage of Angola’s transition to peace, everybody concerned must have human rights as their main priority.”

It was largely an atmosphere of mistrust which caused the delays in completing the main tasks specified in the 1994 peace agreement. At the end of November 1996, the incorporation of UNITA troops into the Angolan Armed Forces had hardly started and the proposed Government of National Unity and Reconciliation was not in place.

Amnesty International is calling on the UN to assist in the establishment of a human rights mechanism to provide human rights protection after its troops withdraw. There are various models which could provide the basis for such a mechanism -- the UN has instituted monitoring operations in Burundi, Cambodia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

Any mechanism set up in Angola could be assisted initially by international human rights monitors and other experts. Eventually these outside experts could be replaced by Angolans.

“If an impartial, independent and effective human rights mechanism were set up it would send a clear message to all in Angola that human rights violations will not be tolerated,” Amnesty International said. “This would help to instil confidence and allow the mistrust to fade.”

“The UN should ensure that the Angolan peace process is not considered complete until adequate protection for human rights, without which peace cannot last, is established.”

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