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Angola: Unarmed civilians caught in the spiral of violence

Amidst reports of escalating fighting in Angola and fears of widespread abuses of human rights, Amnesty International is calling on the government and *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA), National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, to forbid deliberate and arbitrary killings of unarmed people and to prevent indiscriminate killings.

“All combatants must be made aware that killing and torture of prisoners are war crimes for which they should be held responsible. International humanitarian and human rights law requires all combatants to protect the lives and safety of all non-combatants,” Amnesty International said.

Very few details have emerged about what is happening to civilians living in conflict zones but there have been several unconfirmed reports of human rights violations. In the past both UNITA and government forces have carried out human rights abuses. Given this history, there is every reason to fear that human rights abuses have increased in step with fighting.

On 14 December 1998, there were reports that UNITA has surrounded the city of Kuito and is attacking Kuito airport with heavy weapons putting in danger the lives of unarmed civilians, including many children, who are thronging the airport awaiting evacuation.

Earlier this month, the simmering conflict flared into heavy fighting. Government military aircraft attacked Andulo, a UNITA stronghold, following the evacuation of United Nations (UN) personnel who had been held there for over four weeks. UNITA has also reportedly occupied a string of towns to the north and east of Kuito: Cunhinga, Chipeta, Catabola and Camacupa. Government troops are on the offensive against Bailundo, a UNITA military base, while UNITA troops have begun attacking Huambo to the south of Bailundo. UNITA troops also surround Uige in northern Angola where the government is said to be arming civilians.

These military operations are creating new waves of internally displaced people. Some have fled in terror to the city centres in Uige and Huambo. Some 90,000 people from near the village of Chinguar, between Kuito and Huambo, have reportedly fled to Kuito.

Background

In the past, in situations of tension or armed attacks, human rights abuses have been routine in Angola. Both sides have tortured prisoners to obtain information and deliberately and arbitrarily killed those suspected of supporting the other side. Police, unarmed civilians and soldiers of both sides have raided villages, firing indiscriminately and burning houses. Entire communities have fled from these abuses.

The torture and killing of prisoners are war crimes and commanding officers have a duty to ensure that those under their command respect the laws of war, Amnesty International said.

The torture and killing of civilians are forbidden by Common article 3 of the Geneva Conventions which are binding on both parties. The Geneva Conventions also prohibit indiscriminate attacks against civilians. Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions, to which the Government acceded in 1984, states that “the civilian population as such, as well as individual citizens, shall not be the object of attack” or of terror tactics.

During 1998, the Angolan Peace Accords once more collapsed in conflict. Agreed in 1991, they broke down after UNITA disputed the result of the September 1992 elections. They were reaffirmed in 1994 but UNITA remained heavily armed and refused to cede control of territory to the government. In September 1998, the government lost patience and refused to deal any further with the UNITA leader, Jonas Savimbi. The government, which is militarily involved in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, recalled some of its units. UNITA has also received military equipment in defiance of UN sanctions forbidding the supply of arms to UNITA.

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