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ANGOLA: ACTIVISTS PREVENTED FROM DISTRIBUTING COVID-19 ESSENTIALS

Angolan authorities are preventing local activists and non-governmental organizations from distributing information and essential hygiene products such as sanitizers, soaps and masks to Indigenous people and traditional communities in the context of COVID-19, Amnesty International said today.

On 2 April, nine activists from the local NGO, MBATIKA, who are working to distribute information on Covid-19 and protective products to the San people and traditional communities in the rural area of Cuando Cubango province of the country, were assaulted with baton sticks and threatened with guns by the police before they were arrested and held for eight hours.

Since their arrest and subsequent release, MBATIKA has been awaiting the provincial authorities to issue permission to continue the awareness campaign within marginalized communities.

The government of Cuando Cubango province has been broadcasting essential information on COVID-19 through radio and television. However, Indigenous peoples in the rural areas of the province do not have access to electronic broadcasting due to the lack of electricity. The work of activists and local NGOs has been essential in ensuring that the communities have access to information about methods of preventing and controlling the spread of COVID-19.

The San and traditional communities are at greater risk due to the lack of access to adequate food and clean drinking water as a result of the current drought season in the region. Information on the preventive measures against COVID-19, water and sanitation facilities, and adequate healthcare services are fundamental to avoid the spread of the disease among Indigenous peoples.

Access to information is one of the key dimensions to effectively contain the spread of the virus and protect the right to health. The authorities must ensure that all affected individuals and communities have access to easy, timely trustworthy, and meaningful information concerning the nature and level of the health threat, the possible measures to be taken to mitigate risks, early warning information of possible future consequences and information on ongoing response efforts.

Police abuse of force and enforcement of penalties

Several incidents of police abuse of force have been reported since security forces were deployed to the streets to ensure public compliance to the national response against COVID-19, decreed by the President João Lourenço on 27 March. On 4 April, police beat up 10 people on the streets in Bucu-Zau municipality, Cabinda province.

According to local reports, seven of the 10 men were arrested while on their way to buy food in the market. Another two were arrested while returning from the hospital after the death of a family member. Finally, the police arrested another man going to the hospital where his wife was about to give birth. The 10 men spent the night in one prison cell, which some of them reported had poor hygienic conditions. The men were progressively released from 5 April and the last two men were released on 7 April.

The 26 March Presidential Decree establishes that the infringement of movement restrictions is punishable as a crime of disobedience which enables immediate arrest.

Amnesty International is calling on governments to stop using coercive approaches in enforcing compliance with public health restrictions, and ensure that people are empowered and supported to comply voluntarily with the required measures. In particular, Angola should avoid imposing prison sentences for breaching restrictions and ensure that any other penalty, included fines, are strictly necessary and proportionate.

Background

On 20 March, MBATIKA sent a communication about the campaign to the local administration, provincial government and command of the provincial police. The campaign is aimed at increasing the awareness of rural communities and indigenous people on methods of preventing and controlling the spread of COVID-19. Since 21 March, MBATIKA's activists were working with the San communities in several municipalities of Cuando Cubango province, including Menongue, Mavinga, Cuito and Rivungo municipalities before they were arrested. MBATIKA then sent a permission request to continue the COVID-19 awareness campaign, but the authorities have not yet replied.

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