

THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN ANGOLA

ISSUE

After 19 years of almost continuous civil war, Angola's ongoing humanitarian crisis and poor human rights record continue to be of great concern to the Canadian government. While encouraged by the successful conclusion of the Lusaka peace talks, Canada continues to urge both sides to demonstrate the political will required to create a sustainable peace and begin the long process of national reconciliation and reconstruction.

BACKGROUND

Following independence from Portugal in 1975, conflict between the MPLA government and UNITA rebel movement, fanned by rivalry between the superpowers, degenerated into a civil war that left one-third of the population displaced and hundreds of thousands dead. Under pressure from the United States and Russia to resolve the conflict, following the end of the cold war, direct negotiations under Portuguese mediation began in April 1990 and resulted in the signing of the Bicesse Accords of May 31, 1991. The Accords provided for a ceasefire, the deployment of the UN Angolan Verification Mission (UNAVEM) II, the creation of a national army and multiparty elections planned for late 1992.

Multiparty elections were held in September 1992, even though neither the Government nor UNITA forces were fully demobilized. The MPLA won the elections which the UN declared to have been generally free and fair. However, UNITA refused to accept defeat, challenged the legitimacy of the elections and threw the country back into civil war. The UN resumed its efforts to bring the two parties together at peace talks in Lusaka which after nine months of negotiations concluded in the signing of the Lusaka Protocol on November 20, 1994.

Fighting escalated in the lead up to the signing with each side attempting to gain as much territory as possible. A ceasefire is gradually taking hold. The UN estimates that 3.7 million people, one third of the population, are in need of some type of emergency assistance. The UN considers Angola to be one of, if not the, most mined country in the world with more than one mine laid per Angolan, or over 11 million mines. Health services and nutrition levels have suffered to the extent that UNICEF now lists Angola as having the second highest child mortality rate (under 5 years of age) in the world at 292 deaths per 1000 live births.

In Angola, there is little respect for the most basic human right, the right to life, as reports of atrocities committed by both sides have surfaced and thousands of people have died through war famine and disease. The enjoyment of basic civil, political and economic rights enshrined in the constitution is extremely limited. Both sides have been accused of discriminating on the basis of race, sex, religion, ethnicity and social and linguistic grouping. Those who have been disabled by the numerous land mines also face discrimination, as the government tends to institutionalize amputees rather than integrating them into society.