

December 1992

HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN ANGOLA

ISSUE

Angola's deteriorating human rights situation and return to a virtual state of civil war is of great concern to the Canadian Government. Not only does it represent a major setback for international efforts to end the fifteen years of brutal civil war that have virtually destroyed this potentially prosperous nation, but the manner in which the democratic process is being derailed is a setback to the promotion of democratic development in Africa.

BACKGROUND

After a long anti-colonial struggle, Angola gained its independence from Portugal in 1975. The rivalry among the nationalist forces led to a bitter post-independence civil war between the MPLA, which had seized power, and the UNITA movement. After suffering initial setbacks, UNITA's strategy of guerilla warfare and economic sabotage enabled it to control large sections of the country, although in the process destroying much of Angola's infrastructure and practically eliminating agricultural and industrial production.

The human toll was roughly estimated at 500,000 casualties with one third of the population left displaced. Assassination and torture were commonly used by both sides. In 1989, Africa Watch published a comprehensive report of Angolan "violations of the laws of war" documenting widespread abuses against the civilian population. The extensive saturation of rural areas with anti-personnel mines gave Angola the infamous distinction of being the country with the highest per capita number of war amputees (estimates range from 40,000 to 70,000 amputees). The war also had a devastating effect on the delivery of health programs. In UNICEF's 1992 ranking of 170 countries based on number of deaths of children under five, Angola ranked third from the bottom (just behind Mozambique and Afghanistan) with 292 child deaths per 1000 live births.

The Angolan conflict became one of the regional conflicts of the cold war with the Soviet Union and Cuba on the MPLA side and the United States and South Africa providing support to UNITA. The end of superpower rivalry provided the impetus for peace talks to begin. Under pressure from the United States and Russia, the MPLA and UNITA began direct negotiation under Portuguese mediation culminating in the signing of the Bicesse Peace Accords in May 1991. Elections were held with United Nations assistance on 29-30 September 1992 with the MPLA defeating UNITA in both the legislative and presidential voting.

Even though the United Nations declared the elections to have been generally free and fair, UNITA has refused to accept defeat and has disputed the legitimacy of the elections.