

HUMAN RIGHTS IN ANGOLA

ISSUE

Peace has been slow in coming to Angola where, in spite of obvious improvements, the human rights situation continues to be a concern to the Canadian government and to the whole international community.

BACKGROUND

The year 1995 saw only a halfhearted application of the Lusaka peace accords. False starts characterized the attempts to quarter the UNITA soldiers and the armed forces, including the rapid intervention police force; nothing was achieved. Nor was there any progress in the discussions on demobilizing the combatants and forming an integrated army. The armed forces continue to attack a number of UNITA-controlled regions. Not until the end of 1995 did the government agree to end its dealings with a South African mercenary firm. Both the MPLA and UNITA are responsible for violating the terms of the peace agreements. The resultant skirmishes, distrust and bitterness are hampering any efforts to restore normality. However, the leaders of both parties have reiterated their intention to fulfill the undertakings made at Lusaka and to do their utmost to prevent a reversion to the civil war which has claimed more than 500,000 lives since 1975, most of them civilians.

In this precarious state of peace, the civilian population groups are no longer the target of military attacks; this has considerably improved the situation with regard to the right to life. Far less respect is accorded to the right to the integrity of the individual. With 10 million anti-personnel mines, Angola has one of the world's highest rates of mutilation; among the victims are large numbers of women, children and peasants. In 1995, there were even some cases of new mines being laid during localized confrontations. Since mines do not lose their potential to maim for many years, they are lasting danger to the physical security of people. Banditry is another threat. With the delay in the process of demobilizing, many inactive soldiers who are receiving little or no pay are tempted to harass, pillage, extort and kidnap. Sometimes the police are suspected of collusion with bandit groups. Public order has totally disintegrated in some parts of the country.

There are many restrictions on freedom of movement, partly because of the mines, and partly because of UNITA's and MPLA's unwillingness to allow people to pass through enemy-controlled areas. Less than one-quarter of the 1.2 million or so refugees have returned to their region of origin. Such restrictions on freedom of movement seriously hinder the delivery of humanitarian aid programs.

The new constitution of 1991 recognizes the major civil, political and economic rights, along with the independence of the judiciary. However, the constitution is disregarded in the UNITA-controlled regions, and is only feebly applied in the regions under government control, because of the lack of institutional capability, aggravated by the often arbitrary