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Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa



Worldwide commitment

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European Union must take strong action to protect Angolan human rights defenders

The European Union has said it is 'deeply concerned' about recent threats made by government officials against prominent human rights organizations in Angola but has no plans to take further action, even though its own Guidelines provide for démarches and public statements when human rights defenders are at immediate or serious risk.

International human rights organisations are calling on the European Union to ask the Angolan government to withdraw publicly threats made in July against national and international organisations working on human rights and civic education in the run-up to the southern African country's first democratic elections in 2008.

Mr. Pedro Walipi Calenga the Director of the Angolan Government's Technical Unit of the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid, accused the organisations concerned on national radio of operating illegally, being sponsored by opposition political parties, and of using human rights claims as a cover for breaking the law. He threatened that the Public Prosecutor would investigate, and that the international NGOs could subsequently be expelled from the country.

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in its July report referred to 'very grave' threats made against organizations which the UNOCHR regards as entirely legal, and whose work is legitimate. It also reported Mr Walipi explicitly stood by his accusations.

International human rights organisations are now seeking concrete action by the EU to prevent the harassment of human rights defenders in Angola, according to its own Guidelines. 'We are urging the EU Presidency to seek a public repudiation of the threats by the Angolan authorities and to make a clear statement regarding the legality of the human rights organisations concerned' said Chris Collier of the Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa (NiZA).

The EU Presidency, which is currently held by Portugal, said in a written response in August to concerns raised by eight international human rights organizations, - Amnesty International, the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), Christian Aid, Front Line, Global Witness, the Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), NIZA and OxfamNovib¹ – that it had been recognized that the accusations were baseless and that it had asked the Angolan authorities to clarify them. It further promised to 'closely monitor' the situation.

However, European Commission representatives in Angola meeting with the three national organizations concerned, AJPD, Maos Livres and SOS Habitat, reportedly stated that the EU did not have any role to play in raising concerns over the accusations with the Angolan authorities, and advised the organizations to defend themselves by legal means.

Angola has a very poor record on human rights. Angolan and international NGOs have reported recently on serious violations of the right to housing and forced displacement, and on a 'culture of police impunity'.² Last week a UN working group reported after visiting the country that arbitrary detention, torture, denial of access to legal representation and harsh prison conditions continued to be widespread.³

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Notes

1. See Joint Statement to the President of European Council by Amnesty International, COHRE, Christian Aid, Front Line, Global Witness, ICCO, NIZA and Oxfam Novib, 31 July 2007 & 'Christian Aid calls for an end to the harassment of human rights defenders', Christian Aid press release, August 01 2007.

2. See Human Rights Watch/SOS Habitat "They Pushed Down the Houses": Forced Evictions and Insecure Land Tenure for Luanda's Urban Poor, A 1907, May 15 2007 (<http://hrw.org/reports/2007/angola0507/angola0507web.pdf>) & Amnesty International *Angola: Lives in Ruins: forced evictions continue*, AFR 12/001/2007, 15 January 2007 (<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAFR120012007>). Also 'Above the Law: Police Accountability in Angola' Amnesty International USA, September 2007 Ref: AFR 12/005/2007 (<http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?id=ENGAFR120052007&lang=e>)

3. See Working Group on Arbitrary Detention visited Angola 27 September 2007, <http://www.ohchr.org/english/issues/detention/index.htm> & IRIN 'ANGOLANS STILL SUBJECT TO ARBITRARY DETENTION, OTHER ABUSES, SAYS UN EXPERT GROUP', 28 September 2007.