

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Open Letter

AI Index: AFR 12/009/2007 (Public)
News Service No: 148
31 July 2007

Angola: Open letter to EU regarding situation of human rights defenders in Angola

To: Dr Luís Filipe Marques Amado, President of the Council of the European Union

Dear Dr Amado,

Amnesty International (AI), the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), Christian Aid, Front Line, Global Witness, the Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), the Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa (NiZA) and Oxfam Novib write to you in your capacity as current holder of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers of the European Union (EU) to express our concerns about recent accusations Angolan government officials have made against human rights defenders in Angola. We are calling for a firm European Union response to these accusations, in conformity with the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, adopted in June 2004 by the Council.

As you may be aware, on 10 July, the Director of the Angolan Government's Technical Unit for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (UTCAH), Mr. Pedro Walipi Kalenga, alleged in a radio broadcast that certain national and international organizations operating in Angola were violating the law and mobilizing the population to oppose government measures. [The national organizations under threat are: the Angolan Associations Associação Justiça, Paz e Democracia (AJPD), SOS Habitat, and Associação Mãos Livres, whilst the Open Society - Angola, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute and Search for Common Ground are the international organizations under threat] He accused the organizations of being sponsored by opposition political parties, and of using human rights claims as a cover for breaking the law and disobeying the government. He threatened that the cases will be investigated by the public prosecutor and that foreign organizations may be subsequently expelled.

We were encouraged by the fact that in its meeting of 19 July, the EU Heads of Mission in Luanda discussed this matter. Unfortunately, the EU decided not to take any action. This decision was reportedly taken on the basis that, in a meeting with the UN and some donor representatives, an official of the Angolan Ministry of Justice stated that the Ministry has no problem with the legal position of these organizations. However, the accusations have been left standing as no government representative has come forward publically to correct them. To date none of the organizations have been formally notified of any wrongdoing or informed of the legal basis for such accusations. The Justice Ministry's recognition of the legality of the activities of these organizations is, in our view, no reason for the EU not to act. On the contrary, it is clear evidence of the ill-will of the officials who allege that the organizations are breaking the law and of the intimidating purpose of their statements.

We see Mr. Walipi's accusations, transmitted through the government-controlled media, as part of an ongoing and systematic effort by the Angolan Government to vilify local human rights defenders whose work is not only legitimate but fundamental in a democratic society. Similar accusations against Mãos Livres and SOS Habitat have been made on a number of occasions. Earlier this year Mr. Walipi also stated publically that UTCAH was reviewing the activities of several registered organizations and would eventually initiate procedures to close them down. We are informed that the United Nations Human Rights Office in Luanda is also deeply concerned about the statement and has vouched for the legality and legitimacy of the activities of these organizations. The leaders of the four organizations we have spoken to directly, Open Society - Angola, Associação Justiça, Paz e Democracia (AJPD), SOS Habitat, and Associação Mãos Livres, also judge the situation to be very serious. They believe the aim of such statements by government officials is to undermine their legitimacy in the eyes of donors and the public, intended possibly to undermine election-related activities. They fear that without international pressure they may face legal actions to shut down their activities, as in the recent case of the Angolan association Mpalabanda (the only human rights organization working in the oil-producing province of Cabinda).

Open Society - Angola, AJPD, SOS Habitat, and Associação Mãos Livres are organizations that each work to promote and protect human rights as defined and discussed in the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, including by "documenting violations" and "seeking remedies for victims of such violations through the provision of legal, psychological, medical or other support."

As such, we share the opinion of these human rights defenders that action by the EU is urgent and necessary. The EU should express concern about violations against human rights defenders and underline the legitimacy of the work of these human rights defenders through reference to international standards and the third country government's own human rights commitments. We call on the EU to express to the Angolan authorities at the highest possible level its concerns about the vilification and harassment by government officials of organizations carrying out legitimate human rights activities. The EU should demand an end to this harassment and request that the government publically clarify its position regarding the legality and legitimacy of their activities, thereby annulling the accusations of Mr. Walipi and others. We further urge the EU to remain in contact with these and other human rights defenders in Angola so as to assess any actual or potential obstacles to their activities. We believe such a response, as provided for in the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, is warranted by this serious situation.

We thank you for your attention to this matter and hope to hear of any relevant actions undertaken by your Presidency as soon as possible.

Sincerely yours,

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