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Angola: Grave Police Abuses Against Activists

Impartially Investigate, Prosecute Abusive Security Force Members
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- Angolan security forces have carried out more than a dozen unlawful killings and numerous other serious abuses against political activists and peaceful protesters since January 2023.
- Angolan security forces have for decades committed unlawful killings, used excessive force against protesters, and arbitrarily arrested and detained opposition activists.
- The Angolan government should adopt meaningful reforms for police conduct. The international community should press the government to hold abusers accountable.



People hold up a sign that reads “A country badly governed” during a march against rising fuel prices and the end of street vending in Luanda, Angola, June 17, 2023. © 2023 ROGERIO/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

(Johannesburg) – Angolan security forces have carried out more than a dozen unlawful killings and numerous other serious abuses against political activists and peaceful protesters since January 2023, Human Rights Watch said today. The government should ensure urgent, impartial, and transparent investigations into alleged rights violations and appropriately sanction or prosecute security force members responsible.

Members of the Angola National Police and its Criminal Investigation Service, and the State Security and Intelligence Service have been implicated in unlawful killings of at least 15 people, as well as the arbitrary arrests and detention of hundreds more. Those targeted include social and political activists, outspoken artists, and protesters who organized or participated in peaceful anti-government activities throughout the country.

“The Angolan police appear to be targeting those who speak out against government policies,” said Zenaida Machado, senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Angolan authorities should urgently

act to end abusive police policies and practices and ensure that there is justice for victims and their family members.”

Between January and June 2023, Human Rights Watch interviewed by phone 32 people, including victims of abuses and their relatives, witnesses, and security sources in Luanda, the capital, and in Cabinda and Bié.

In February, men who identified themselves as Criminal Investigation Service members took into custody a group of young men whose bodies were found three days later at a hospital morgue in Luanda. A 24-year-old friend of the victims said that the officers had been monitoring the group, who were known for taking part in various anti-government protests across the city. “I know they [the police] don’t like us,” he said. “But I never imagined they might kill.”

Security forces have also arbitrarily arrested and detained people who publicly criticized the government. The police detained the activist rapper known as Kamesu Voz Seca for five days without charge after stopping his car one night at a roadblock in Luanda and finding flyers with “President, go” and similar messages.

The authorities detained a taxi driver and accused him of promoting acts of rebellion after a video went viral on social media in which he imitates the late rebel leader Jonas Savimbi and calls for the removal from power of the ruling party, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola, MPLA).

Angola’s government is obligated to respect the human rights to life, freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association, guaranteed under Angola’s constitution as well as in international human rights treaties that Angola has ratified, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

However, for decades the Angolan security forces have violated these fundamental rights, committing extrajudicial executions and other unlawful killings, using excessive and unnecessary force against protesters, and harassing, arbitrarily arresting, and detaining opposition activists.

In recent years the government has made some attempts to improve law enforcement, notably firing abusive police officers, incorporating human rights in the police training curriculum, and regularly hosting human rights activities in partnership with the United Nations and domestic nongovernmental organizations.

Criminal prosecutions of police officers for unlawful use of force remain rare. Attempts to improve police conduct have not been supported by strong accountability measures such as disciplinary actions and criminal prosecutions, with many cases of police abuse going unpunished. Angola lacks an independent body to address complaints about wrongful use of police force, as noted by the UN Human Rights Committee in 2013.

The Angolan government should urgently adopt concrete and meaningful reforms for the conduct and oversight of police to promote full respect for human rights and the rule of law, Human Rights Watch said. The international community, including the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the African Union, the European Union, and the United Nations should privately and publicly urge the Angolan government to hold accountable those responsible for these abuses.

“Brutal police crackdowns on protests and peaceful political activity deny all Angolans their rights to participate in the political process and in Angola’s future,” Machado said. “Angolan authorities should urgently take meaningful steps to address unlawful policing or expect further police abuses in the future.”

Unlawful killings

Angolan police have been implicated in several cases of extrajudicial executions and other unlawful killings. Human Rights Watch has documented cases between January and June that resulted in the alleged unlawful killing of at least 15 unarmed people.

On February 14, men who said they were Criminal Investigation Service officers conducting an anti-crime operation in the Cacuaco neighborhood in Luanda took into custody eight men between ages 23 and 32, their family members and friends said. The group had gathered with other friends at a local guest house to celebrate Valentine’s Day. Three witnesses said four men were seen showing their badges and identifying themselves as Criminal Investigation Service officers to a local employee, who stood in the corner watching, before approaching the victims. A friend of the victims, 26, said:

They [the alleged officers] were already there when we arrived. We even mentioned how weird they acted, during our chat. After some minutes, they pulled out their pistols and at gunpoint they selected eight among us and forced them out. They seemed to know exactly who they wanted to take away.

Another friend of the group, 23, said: “Some of us had already been warned by neighbors that the police were after us. You know ... we sometimes organize local protests. We can be loud and troublemakers.”

A Criminal Investigation Service statement confirms that police on February 15 received a complaint filed by friends and family regarding the eight men who had been forced out of the guest house by “men armed with pistols, making death threats, who then destroyed the video surveillance system.” The statement adds that investigations were underway.

The families searched for their relatives and located them at Maria Pia Hospital morgue, in Luanda, on February 17. The sister of one of the victims, Joao Licamba Praia, said:

We looked for them everywhere, including all the city’s jails, before going to the morgue of Maria Pia. Even if they had committed any crime, they deserved to be heard by the authorities. To kill heads of families, sons of families ... like animals, is simply wrong.

She said his body was found with bullet wounds and “holes in the head,” and that the relatives of the other seven victims also found bullet wounds on their bodies.

A police spokesman, Manuel Halawaia, dismissed the allegations that agents killed the men as unfounded. He told Human Rights Watch on April 10: “We are conducting investigations aimed at finding the authors of this crime.” The Angolan police have yet to release the findings.

Angola police have on various occasions wrongfully used lethal force against peaceful protesters. On June 5, in Huambo city, police officers fired on taxi drivers protesting an increase in fuel prices. A police statement seen by Human Rights Watch confirmed the killing of five people. The media reported that as of June 7, the number of deaths had increased to eight after three people died from their injuries in the hospital. The sister of one of the victims said that her brother, 23, was a social activist who participated in demonstrations calling for better living conditions:

There were taxi drivers and other activists like us, among the demonstrators. Soon the place became chaotic. It's not clear who started the confusion: police or taxi drivers. Tear gas everywhere ... and bullets flying over our heads. My brother was shot in the neck, and he lost a lot of blood because there was no one to assist. He died before we reached the hospital.

These documented cases of extrajudicial killings in Angola are not isolated. Human Rights Watch has documented several cases of police violence, including killings and use of excessive force against unarmed people. In June, Angola's main opposition party, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola, UNITA) said it had documented over 130 cases of people killed by security forces during protests or demonstrations since 2017.

In 2018, the investigative journalist and human rights activist Rafael Marques published a report documenting over 50 cases of extrajudicial executions by Angolan security forces. In response, the authorities pledged to investigate. The outcome of the investigations, if any, has not been made public.

Arbitrary Arrests, Detention

The Angolan authorities have repeatedly denied people's rights to protest by targeting peaceful anti-government demonstrators, using unnecessary or excessive force, and arbitrary arrests and detentions of organizers and participants.

Cases of arbitrary arrests and detention have been more frequent in the oil rich province of Cabinda. Since President João Lourenço took office in September 2017, the authorities have arbitrarily arrested and detained over 100 activists in the province for engaging in human rights and peaceful pro-independence activities. In the most recent major incident, on March 25, police detained 3 organizers and 45 participants attending a human rights workshop.

Human Rights Watch has also documented various other cases in which people were detained or arrested simply for peacefully protesting or criticizing the government or President Lourenço.

On March 23, Angola security forces arrested a 34-year-old man in Luanda for imitating the late rebel leader Jonas Savimbi. Nascente Sapalo Santos, a taxi driver whose physical appearance resembles Savimbi's, was accused of promoting acts of rebellion after a video in which he was wearing a camouflage uniform similar to Savimbi's, while imitating his voice and calling for political change and the removal of the ruling MPLA party, went viral on social media.

A relative told Human Rights Watch that three officers who identified themselves as Criminal Investigation Service members arrested Santos on the street, without presenting a warrant, and took him to one of the agency's detention facilities in Luanda, where he was kept incommunicado for five days. The relative said:

They found him on the streets where he works. Forced him inside their car and took him away, without any document or warning. Officers, I don't know if they were in the same group, then went to his house, intimidated his wife and children, took many photos, confiscated his Savimbi materials, including clothes. Until now, they have not told us what his crime was. Is it a crime to be a fan of Savimbi?

On March 28, the authorities released Santos from custody without charge. He told Human Rights Watch that police officers interrogated him for hours, and tried to force him to admit he was involved in acts of rebellion. He said:

They insisted that my imitating Savimbi was an act of rebellion. They would make me go on for hours without food or water, responding to their questions. They threatened to go to my house and search everywhere. I told them that they were free to do so because I had nothing to hide. I told them I had committed no crime. They eventually allowed me to go.

The authorities also arbitrarily detained the activist rapper Antonio Manuel, better known as Kamesu Voz Seca. He said that on March 31, just after midnight, police stopped him at a checkpoint in Luanda's Kilamba neighborhood, on his way home from a concert. After checking his identification documents, they searched his car, where they found various flyers with messages such as "Ministers, go," "President, go." Manuel said the police officer in charge of the operation, a man identified only as Fernando, told him that they had found papers in his car that required him "to follow them to the station."

He said: "I initially did not want to follow them. But they were many and intimidating, and I was alone. I felt I had only two choices: follow them or stay there and be killed."

Manuel was held at Police Station 51 without any formal accusation or charge for five days. On April 5, a Luanda judge ordered his release after the police failed to present any evidence that he had committed a

crime.

On June 17, widespread protests took place across Angola following a government decision to cut fuel subsidies. Ahead of the widely announced protests, the authorities in Huambo province detained a number of activists. Among those detained was Jose Ezequiel, a 28-year-old activist who said that over 20 officers from the State Security and Intelligence Service and the Criminal Investigation Service raided his home in the city of Huambo, just after 4 a.m. on June 17. They accused him of organizing a deadly taxi drivers' protest that took place days earlier, then arrested him without a warrant. He alleged that the officers fired their guns at the door to his house and threatened his family members, including his 5-year-old daughter:

My family lived through moments of terror. They pointed a gun at my daughter's head to force her to reveal my whereabouts. They threatened my wife to death. They fired real bullets at my house door and ceiling. All of that to intimidate us.

He said that the officers took him to the Huambo Criminal Investigation Service office, where dozens of other activists were being held:

There at the station, they accused us of organizing rebellions and protests. They forced us to hold papers written "crime of rebellion" and took many photos. They then kept us in overcrowded cells for several hours before releasing us the following day without charges.

On the same day, in Bie province, the police detained dozens of activists and artists, including the musician Pedro Sapalo also known as "Pedrito de Bie," the media reported. Sapalo said that he and about a dozen people wearing t-shirts with the words "*Basta! Bie não é Bengo*" (Enough! Bie is not Bengo) gathered at a Cuito city square, Praça da Vergonha, to protest. At the square, three police officers approached him and ordered him to follow them to the Cuito Criminal Investigations Service station, where he was accused of "inciting tribalism," for allegedly making the comparison between Bié and Bengo.

The "Bie is not Bengo" is a protest slogan against the Angolan president's decision to appoint a Bengo-born politician, Pereira Alfredo, as the governor of Bie in 2018. Days before his arrest, Sapalo had recorded and shared a video calling on Angolans to join the June 17 nationwide protests against the fuel price. Police officers, in the presence of a senior provincial police official, questioned him for hours:

They asked me so many silly questions. They asked me about the video. They asked me why I was comparing Bengo to Bié. They also asked if I was suggesting if one province was better than the other. They kept insisting that the words on my t-shirts were criminal, but never explained why. They kept me for the whole weekend with no formal accusations.

A judge ordered Sapalo's release after two days when state prosecutors failed to provide evidence that he had committed any crime.

Applicable Legal Standards

The Angolan police and other officials are bound by articles of the Angolan constitution that protect fundamental rights and liberties. Article 47 of the constitution provides that, “freedom of assembly and peaceful, unarmed demonstration shall be guaranteed to all citizens, without the need for any authorization and under the terms of the law.”

The Guiding Principles for the Policing of Assemblies in Africa provide that officers may only use force when strictly necessary. When using force, law enforcement officials should exercise restraint and act in proportion to the seriousness of the offense and to the legitimate objective to be achieved. The African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights’ Guidelines on Freedom of Association and Assembly in Africa further states that “assembly organizers shall not be penalized on the basis of acts committed by individuals aimed at disrupting assemblies or clashes provoked by law enforcement.”

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects everyone against summary execution and torture and other ill-treatments, and upholds the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. The UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials provides for the police to use the minimum necessary force at all times. Firearms may only be used to disperse violent assemblies when other less harmful means are not practicable. Law enforcement officers may only intentionally make lethal use of firearms when strictly unavoidable to protect life.

Recommendations

To the Angolan government:

- Promptly and impartially investigate all allegations of unlawful and excessive use of force and other human rights violations by the police, military, and other government officials, and hold all those responsible to account in fair public trials.
- Seek the adoption of concrete and meaningful reforms for the conduct and oversight of police to promote full respect for human rights and the rule of law.
- Ensure that the principles of necessity and proportionality in the use of force are adequately reflected in legislation and policies and complied with in practice, in line with the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.
- Introduce measures to prevent, investigate, and appropriately prosecute extrajudicial executions and other serious violations by the police.
- Publish the outcome of investigations into alleged violations by government security forces, and promptly and impartially address complaints about police abuses.

To regional and international organizations and concerned governments including SADC, the African Union, the European Union, and the United Nations:

- Ensure that any financial or security assistance to the Angolan security forces is fully consistent with international human rights standards and will not contribute to police abuses.
- Press the Angolan government to provide adequate public information concerning government investigations into alleged violations.
- Support government efforts to adopt concrete and meaningful reforms for the conduct and oversight of police to promote full respect for human rights and the rule of law.
- Support prompt and impartial investigations and appropriate prosecution of security force members responsible for human rights abuses.

Region / Country

- Africa
- Angola

Topic

- Free Speech

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