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Angola: Catholic Church involved in forced evictions

Amnesty International today released a report revealing the scale and extent of forced evictions in Angola, and expressing particular concern at forced evictions carried out by Angolan authorities, apparently at the request of the Catholic Church in Angola.

The organization said that nearly all of the forced evictions were accompanied by excessive use of force, which sometimes involved police beatings of children and women -- including one pregnant woman -- and indiscriminate shooting at residents attempting to protect their homes.

According to the report, *Lives in ruins: forced evictions continue*, thousands of families have been forcibly evicted since 2001 -- nearly always without notification to the families affected. Tens of thousands have been left without shelter, with hundreds of families still living their lives in ruins.

Since September 2004, the homes of residents in the Kilamba Kiaxi municipality have been demolished repeatedly to make room for public and private housing projects. In 2006, the Angolan government publicly acknowledged the right to compensation of those forcibly evicted, and proclaimed that it was reviewing its housing strategy with a view to responding to the housing needs of its urban population. Thus far, none of the affected residents of Kilamba Kiaxi has received compensation or alternative adequate accommodation.

"Despite these claims by the government, the housing situation in Luanda has not improved -- in fact, hundreds of families are still homeless after having been forced from their homes," said Tawanda Hondora, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme. "Disturbingly, many forced evictions in the last two years have been carried out apparently at the request of the Catholic Church."

In 1998, the Angolan government formally returned to the Catholic Church land the Church owned prior to independence, in response to a request by the late Pope John Paul II when he visited Angola in 1992. However, families have been living on this land -- in the Wenji Maka neighbourhood of Luanda -- for several years, or even decades in some cases.

When granting the land title to the Catholic Church, Angolan authorities reportedly did not take into consideration those people already living on the land, and national police have repeatedly tried to expel over 2,000 families in the area where the Catholic Church intends to build a sanctuary.

In response to Amnesty International's request for information regarding the Catholic Church's involvement in these forced evictions, the Archbishop of Luanda stated the Church, when reclaiming title over land, had asked the government to provide land in other areas for the affected individuals. The Archbishop also alleged that in many instances individuals put up constructions on land when they found out that the Church had intentions to use the land. The Archbishop further justified the actions of the Church by saying "*summum ius summa iniuria*" (extreme law, extreme justice) -- or, as the Archbishop interpreted it, "*justica absoluta pode desembocar em injustica*" (absolute justice can result in injustice).

"The Catholic Church should not ask the Angolan authorities to evict people occupying land to which the Church has been granted title," said Tawanda Hondora.

"However, the primary responsibility for forced evictions rests with the Angolan government, which must not only stop all such illegal action, but also provide assistance to victims of previous forced evictions who remain without shelter and issue clear orders to law enforcement personnel that they must not take part in any further forced evictions and prosecute those responsible for human rights violations."

Background

The Angolan government is reportedly planning the biggest urban project ever attempted in Africa, and is implementing other construction projects with the support of the Chinese government. The resulting increased pressure for urban land is resulting in forced evictions of the poorest families of Luanda from various neighbourhoods in the capital city, driving such families into ever deeper poverty.

Public Document

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