

PRESS RELEASE

JOINT OPEN LETTER

His Excellency João Manuel Gonçalves Lourenço
President of the Republic of Angola

CC: Mr. Francisco Manuel Monteiro Queiroz, Minister of Justice and Human Rights
CC: Mr. Eugénio César Laborinho, Minister of Interior
CC: Mr. Júlio Marcelino Vieira Bessa, Governor of Cuando Cubango Province

19 May 2020

Your Excellency,

RE: Open Letter of concern on members of civil society and religious body facing death threats and intimidation in the Cuando Cubango province

We, the undersigned civil society organizations, write to express our concern with reports of continuing harassment, intimidations and arbitrary detention of human rights defenders in the Cuando Cubango province, namely the members of the non-governmental organization Mission of Beneficence Agriculture of Kubando, Inclusive Technologies and Environment (MBAKITA). In Cuando Cubango, members of civil society who act for the defence and promotion of the rights of ethnic minorities and raise concerns regarding the occupation of Indigenous people and traditional communities' lands have become the target of acts of intimidation, harassment, death threats, assaults and suspicious deaths.

ASSAULT AT WORKPLACE AND HOME

MBAKITA and its members have been under increasing surveillance since the beginning of 2019. They have suffered several assaults at the hands of local authorities for their work defending the rights of ethnic minorities. MBAKITA has been involved in this work for over 18 years.

Unidentified armed men broke into the house of Pascoal Baptistiny, executive director of MBAKITA, on 17 April, 23 April, 11, 12 and 13 May. On these occasions, the men entered into Pascoal Baptistiny's home, tied the hands of the two security guards and took several items of electronic equipment, including three computers, a video camera, memory cards and cell phones. On 15 April 2020, Amnesty International published a complaint about the physical assault and arbitrary detention of nine MBAKITA activists during a COVID-19 prevention campaign in the province of Cuando Cubango. The following day, Pascoal Baptistiny, executive director of MBAKITA, received an anonymous call with the message: "We know the vehicle that has been travelling to the communities, and we will cut your legs". On the evening of 16 April, the association's car was vandalized and immobilized, making it almost impossible for MBAKITA members to travel to the communities. On 17 April, at about 1:30 am, three masked and armed men entered into Mr Pascoal's home in Menongue city, the provincial capital. They immobilized the two security guards at his residence and took two computers, a video camera, memory cards and cell phones.

This break-in was not the first attack against MBAKITA. In 2018 and 2019, MBAKITA's office was broken into by unidentified men who took ten computers, two cameras and six memory cards. The office's training and research room is now dismantled with limited working capacity due to the lack of equipment.

On the night of 28 April 2020, three unidentified men broke into radio ecclesia, a Catholic radio station, and vandalized the broadcast equipment. The catholic radio was unable to broadcast independent news between 29 and 30 April 2020.

ARBITRARY DETENTIONS AND ILL-TREATMENT

On 9 April 2020, police officers used batons to beat up two MBAKITA activists, who were on their way to the organization's office to collect COVID-19 prevention materials. We have concerns that the activists were targeted solely because of their affiliation to MBAKITA and its work.

On 2 April 2020, around 11:00 am, nine MBAKITA activists who distributed information about Covid-19 and protection products to the San indigenous population and traditional communities in the rural area of Menongue, Mavinga, Cuito and Rivungo municipalities of the province of Cuando Cubango, were attacked by the police with batons and threatened with firearms. They were arrested and released eight hours later without charges.

INTIMIDATION AND HARASSMENT

MBAKITA activists regularly receive death threats through anonymous phone calls as a result of their work to defend the rights of ethnic minorities and denounce corruption in the region. For instance, in 2019, MBAKITA released information on the alleged diversion of funding that should have been used to assist Indigenous peoples and traditional communities impacted by the drought. Following this, the activists began to receive an increasing number of death threats through anonymous phone calls.

The callers issued warnings to the recipients: "We know Mr. Pascoal ... if you continue to report on San people's issues, you and your family may disappear"; "The office will be raided and you won't be able to do anything about it, so don't waste your time reporting to the police"; "Stop this or you will die and your family too"; "The Indigenous community does not need any saviour".

Following the break-in into Mr Pascoal's home on 17 April, several MBAKITA activists reported receiving intimidating anonymous calls ordering them to stop working for the organization. As a result, five activists stopped working for the organization for fear of their lives.

SUSPICIOUS DEATH OF A HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER

In May 2019, Father Domingos Paulo Kasanga, commonly known as Caridoso, died of a heart attack. His colleagues suspect he was a victim of poisoning, because days before his death he had celebrated the Easter Mass, during which he criticized the government for the deplorable living conditions of San communities in Angola. After the Mass, Father Kasanga received an anonymous phone call in which the caller told him: "You will die in 72 hours". Father Kasanga informed his colleagues about the call, and three days later, he was found dead. No autopsy was con-

ducted. Fearing further intimidation, his colleagues preferred not to report the suspicious circumstances of his death and threats he had received. There has been no investigation into his death, including if he might have been targeted for his human rights work.

The increasing intimidation, harassment and attacks of human rights defenders in Cuando Cubango is aimed at preventing them from carrying their work. This situation is particularly concerning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as humanitarian relief and viral prevention awareness campaigns provided by MBACKITA [and other civil society organizations] are essential to ensure the safety of the more marginalized and isolated communities.

We are concerned with the recurrent intimidation, threats and criminalization of those who, through peaceful and legitimate human rights work, seek to provide assistance to Indigenous peoples and traditional communities. The authorities have an obligation to effectively address threats, attacks, harassment and intimidation against human rights defenders, including, where applicable, by thoroughly, promptly and independently investigating human rights violations against them and bringing the suspected perpetrators

to justice in fair trials.

In this period of a global pandemic, the collaboration between civil society and government can benefit those communities at the receiving end of joint actions and should, thus, be encouraged and facilitated. It is in the interest of states and society at large to recognise, protect and enable human rights defenders to carry out their crucial work so that the harshest impact of the crisis can be mitigated and ensure that no one is left behind.

Therefore, we urge you to take all the appropriate measures to ensure that Mr Pascoal Batistiny and other MBACKITA activists are provided with adequate protection so that they can continue their work freely and without fear of reprisals. We also urge you to ensure that authorities promptly carry out an independent and impartial investigation into the attacks, assaults, death threats and intimidation against Rádio Ecclésia, Mr Pascoal Baptistiny and MBACKITA activists. We further urge you to ensure a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders, allowing them to peacefully continue to carry out their human rights work.

We thank you for your attention on this crucial matter.

Yours sincerely,

Amnesty International
Centro Democracia e Desenvolvimento (CDD)
CIVICUS
FIDH, in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
FREEDOM HOUSE
Friends of Angola
FRONTLINE DEFENDERS
MBACKITA
OMUNGA
Solidariedade Moçambique (SOLDMOZ-ADS)
Southern African Human Rights Defenders Network
Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC)
World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders