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US Government Support for Democratic Electoral Processes in Angola

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U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations
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Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to appear before you this afternoon to speak about USG support for democratic electoral processes in Angola. We are very pleased that the Subcommittee has asked for the U.S. Agency for International Development's input, the views of the Department of State in the person of Dan Mozena, Director, Office of Southern African Affairs, the views of our implementing partners, and those of the invited Angolan participants. As the USAID Deputy Assistant Administrator for Democracy and Governance and the chair of the USG inter-agency Governing Justly and Democratically technical cone under the joint Department of State and USAID foreign assistance reform effort, I am particularly pleased to be able to address you today. My task is to share USAID's view of Angola's emergent electoral system and proto-democratic political situation and to describe USAID's central activities in support of the USG's efforts to improve the inclusiveness and credibility of Angola's anticipated elections, thereby building the confidence of the Angolan electorate and political parties in the new system.

Angola Country Background

The current political situation in Angola is heavily influenced by its recent history of protracted civil war and by the realities of enduring poverty in the midst of immense mineral and agricultural wealth. The personal histories of most Angolans are dominated by memories of war-associated insecurities and deprivations. An important part of this collective memory is having had expectations of peace dashed when the 1992 elections triggered a return to violence. Angolans, political leaders and average citizens alike, therefore regard the anticipated national elections with some degree of trepidation.

Decades of civil war have also left Angola in the position of being a relative latecomer to democratic electoral processes. With the exception of the 1992 elections, Angolan citizens and officials have had no experience of democracy and elections. The long civil war, coupled with Angola's 500 years of colonial subjugation -which included the long rule of a Portuguese dictatorship in the years prior to independence-interfered with the development of a democratic culture.

As a result of a clear cut military victory, Angolan decision making is dominated by a small political, economic and military elite associated with a single political party. At the same time, despite a clear cut victory, the terms of the peace agreement provided for a unity government. Opposition parties exist and, in fact, the major opposition party is a part of the Government, holding ministerial positions in the cabinet and three of the country's eighteen governorships. Despite their role in the Government, it is fair to say that opposition parties have little ability to "check and balance" ruling party dominance.

The destruction wrought by Angola's war, both in terms of infrastructure and human capacity, add to the challenge of building a democracy and conducting free and fair elections. The state of transportation infrastructure remains poor, local capacity on the part of government and civil society to ensure open elections is weak and disparities in resources among political groups hamper political competition. Constraints on access to information remain, as there is no significant independent media outside the capitol.

Government Election Preparations

Angolan government officials, political party representatives, and civil society advocates have debated the need for and timing of national elections since the signing of the 2002 peace agreement. The international diplomatic and donor community have exerted pressure in favor of elections, but pressure has also come internally in the form of demands from an initially weak, but strengthening, community of civil society organizations and from factions within the political parties, including the ruling party. Many Angolans see the elections as a path to global legitimacy and increased private sector investment.

Over the past eighteen months, the Angolan government has taken concrete steps in preparation for elections. A package of elections laws was promulgated in August of 2005. Initially based on Angola's electoral law for the 1992 elections, the new laws include important provisions for improving the credibility of the elections in the areas of observation, balance of appointments to electoral bodies, and expansion of voting rights. Civil society played a role in bringing about these latter provisions.

The National Electoral Commission (NEC) has been appointed and charged with monitoring the electoral process and ensuring its integrity. The NEC has 11 widely respected members, is chaired by a Supreme Court Justice and includes representatives from the ruling party, opposition parties, and the Government. Sub-units of the NEC have been set up in every province and most municipalities.

The Inter-ministerial Commission of Electoral Processes (CIPE, its acronym based on the Portuguese name) has also been constituted, is charged with administering elections, and will be overseen by the Ministry of Territorial Administration. CIPE has launched training for voter registration and contracted a consortium of companies to provide IT support for the elections. Although no official date has been set by the government, it is widely believed that voter registration may begin as early as September 2006 and will require approximately six months to implement.

While these tangible steps towards elections are welcomed, there remain weaknesses in the Angolan electoral system. The new electoral laws did not create a truly independent election administration body and the provision for public funding of political parties will require the establishment of a transparent implementation mechanism to prevent its use as a patronage tool. Further, the fundamental decision as to which elections to hold (presidential, legislative) has not yet been determined, nor has a date for elections been fixed. Given the projected minimum timeline for voter registration, national elections may be held sometime in calendar year 2007.

U.S. Foreign Policy Priorities and USAID Assistance

U.S. foreign policy priorities in Angola are to strengthen democracy and governance, support economic growth and development, improve health, and promote regional security. Until recently, USAID programs focused on the delivery of food aid and other humanitarian assistance. Under a new program currently coming on stream, USAID focus has shifted to give high priority to strengthening democracy and governance. In addition to helping to prepare for free and fair elections, this includes helping the Government develop the systems and human capacity essential to locking the country onto a path of broad-based growth, supporting Government decentralization efforts, and strengthening the quality of dialogue between Government and civil society. USAID also supports smaller activities in promoting a vibrant independent press and helping modernize the judiciary.

USAID Elections Assistance

USAID activities are designed to support inclusive and credible elections. As mentioned earlier, in the minds of many Angolans, there is still a strong connection between elections and war. The last elections, held in 1992, were never completed as UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi rejected the results and re-initiated armed conflict. In this context, the degree to which civil society and political parties are included in all steps of the electoral process adds credibility to the process and builds confidence among Angolans that peaceful, credible elections can be held. USAID seeks to build the capacities of Angolan civil society organizations and political parties to (1) insure access to accurate information on electoral issues, (2) increase citizen participation in electoral processes, (3) build capacities for independent election monitoring, (4) promote the management and mitigation of election-related conflict, and (5) support the development of issue-driven, internally-democratic political parties.

USAID has delivered a significant portion of its Angola electoral support activities through the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS), a Cooperative Agreement between USAID's Office of

Democracy and Governance and the CEPPS partners (International Republican Institute [IRI], National Democratic Institute [NDI] and IFES). IRI's work has focused on political parties, NDI's on civil society, including a sub-grant to Search for Common Ground to work on election-related conflict mitigation, and IFES has focused on election administration.

Activities to insure access to accurate information on electoral issues revolve around voter education conducted by civil society organizations. USAID partners have provided technical and project management training, as well as voter education materials, to six civil society electoral networks in the provinces of Luanda, Benguela, Huambo, Bié, Uíge, and Lunda-Sul. These electoral networks have conducted voter education on voter registration, democratic principles, citizen rights, and promoting political dialogue in each of their respective provinces. In addition, USAID supports multi-party workshops to inform parties on election topics and public multi-party forums that provide citizens an opportunity to engage directly with political parties.

Increased citizen participation is promoted through several activities. USAID partners provided technical assistance to civil society networks that advocated for reform of the electoral laws. These networks worked with the ruling MPLA and opposition parties throughout the legislative process and succeeded in having up to 80% of their recommendations included in the law on electoral observation. These advocacy efforts generated significant public debate in radio and television media. On the political party side, USAID has supported training on registering voters in ten provinces to most parties who hold seats in the national assembly and other parties with a nationwide base. The parties have used this assistance as the foundation for their voter registration initiatives.

The experience civil society networks have gained through civic education and advocacy lays a foundation for effective elections observation. USAID partners will provide additional technical assistance to civil society organizations and political parties that desire to monitor the various steps of the electoral process.

Management and mitigation of election-related conflict are critical elements of USAID programs. Activities particularly target provinces that experienced fierce fighting during the war. USAID has supported multi-party meetings with local communities. In many cases these have been the first time MPLA and UNITA have sat together for a debate in these communities. USAID partners are encouraging the establishment of municipal level electoral stakeholder meetings with governors, political parties, and other local leaders to manage election conflict as it arises. Training will be provided to political parties on developing a code of conduct and dispute resolution techniques.

Several of the activities cited above serve to strengthen democratic political parties. More specific activities include support for polling to enable political parties to develop party platforms informed by public opinion. Political party training and technical assistance is also provided on topics such as strategic communication, developing party platforms, and province-level party organization.

USG assistance on election administration has been limited, given the Government of the Republic of Angola's (GRA) substantial ability to directly fund electoral processes and the fact that the GRA is still in the process of determining what external support it might want to request from the donors. Discussions are on-going between USG representatives, the National Elections Council (NEC) and interested bilateral and multilateral donors regarding election administration assistance.

Moving Forward - To the Election Day and Beyond

USAID intends to maintain robust support for the Angolan electoral process through election day and will support inclusive political competition and promote good governance at all levels of Angolan government through the foreseeable future. We will continue to support credible, inclusive elections that will lead to the inauguration of an administration with the mandate and will to accelerate the pace of reforms in support of broad-based growth and democratization. USAID stands ready to support the elected government in strengthening decentralization, improving delivery of decentralized public services, increasing budgetary transparency, and strengthening the quality of dialogue between the GRA and its citizens.