

Angolan police under fire

LOUISE REDVERS | LUANDA, ANGOLA - Sep 09 2011 16:09

Twenty-one people have appeared in court in the Angolan capital of Luanda charged with public order offences, following a rare anti-government demonstration that turned violent, leaving several protesters, journalists and police officers injured.

Protesters and rights groups have accused the Angolan police of brutality, and sources claim that undercover intelligence officers infiltrated the crowd and acted as agents provocateurs.

A group of mainly young people without fixed political affiliations gathered in Luanda's Independence Square on September 3 to call for an end to the rule of President Jose Eduardo dos Santos, who has been in power for almost 32 years.

The protest, which had been authorised by the provincial government of Luanda, started peacefully, but organiser Pandito Nerú's failure to appear set tempers flaring. He later claimed that he had been kidnapped at gunpoint and taken to a remote beach for interrogation.

Demanding Nerú's release, some protesters left the designated protest area and made their way towards the presidential palace. They were stopped at a police roadblock where some were arrested.

At this point, witnesses say, the incident turned violent -- video footage filmed on cellphones and seen by the *Mail & Guardian* shows chaotic scenes and people lying bloodied on the pavement.

Two people, unconscious, were taken to hospital and several journalists needed medical attention after being "deliberately targeted".

Portuguese freelance journalist Antonio Cascais said he was attacked on his way back to his hotel after the demonstration. In an interview with Human Rights Watch he said: "They violently grabbed my throat and threw me to the ground, insulting me and saying that I was 'instigating confusion'.

"They stepped on my face to immobilise me immediately and searched my pockets. They took my camera and phones, but didn't touch the \$300 I had on me. Their aim seemed to be neither to beat or rob me but to quickly get hold of the pictures from the demonstration."

A protester, psychology student Diana Pereira (19), said: "The people carrying out the violence weren't part of our group; we don't know who they were. We think they were sent in deliberately to turn things violent and discredit us."

National police commander Paulo de Almeida denied any brutality against protesters or journalists and said the police had a right to maintain public order.

"This is not true," he said by phone from Luanda. "People are creating facts to discredit the Angolan police and the authorities and they are trying to create an image for the international community."

Human Rights Watch strongly condemned the actions of the police and urged an end to "unnecessary and disproportionate force against demonstrators".

Saturday's demonstration followed growing speculation about whether Dos Santos will stand again in next year's election.

An independent Angolan newspaper last week printed a long-circulating rumour that Dos Santos will soon hand over the reins to Manuel Vicente, chairman of Angola's all-powerful national oil company, Sonangol. The ruling MPLA denied this.

Source: Mail & Guardian Online

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