

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence; the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions

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(Please use this reference in your reply)

16 June 2026

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence; Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 54/8, 54/14 and 53/4.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning the recent discovery of a mass grave in Luanda, which has prompted concerns regarding the preservation, exhumation, respectful handling, and identification of the mortal remains contained therein, in accordance with international standards.

According to the information received:

Shortly after Angola became independent from Portugal in November 1975, the two former anti-colonial guerrilla movements, the communist People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the anti-communist National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) have engaged in an intermittent yet devastating civil war. Following the peace agreement signed in 2002, and as part of the reconciliation package, the Commission for Reconciliation in Memory of the Victims of Conflict (CIVICOP) was established in 2019 with the mandate to identify, exhume and deliver the remains of victims of the "political conflicts" that occurred in the country between 1975 and 2002.

On 8 May 2026, CIVICOP officials announced that a mass grave had been identified in Cemetery 14 in Luanda. Reportedly, the grave contains approximately 500 human remains, which may belong to individuals who were forcibly disappeared during the civil war across various provinces of the country in 1977, in events commonly referred to as the "27 May events," during which thousands were reportedly executed following an attempted coup d'état.

CIVICOP officials indicated that the remains would be sent for laboratory testing to confirm the victims' identities and that their families would be notified once the process be completed. One day after the CIVICOP announcement, a list of victim's names was made public with a view to allowing family members to provide DNA samples for compatibility tests. On 22 May, CIVICOP handed over to some families the first nine sets of remains identified from among the skeletal remains found. A ceremony was held in tribute to the victims, but not all families attended.

While prompt action appears to have been taken following the discovery of the mass grave, families of the victims of the civil war were reportedly neither previously informed of this discovery, nor meaningfully involved in a process that directly concerns them. No explanation regarding the origin of the list was shared with the families, nor the criteria used and the evidentiary basis supporting it, neither the scientific methodology used.

While we do not wish to prejudge the accuracy of the information received, we express our concern over the reported lack of sufficient public information following the discovery of a mass grave in Luanda, which has caused profound pain and distress among many families of victims of the civil war and appears inconsistent with their rights to truth, justice and reparation. Many relatives have reported feeling emotionally devastated by the insensitive manner in which such a deeply traumatic and delicate matter was publicly presented, without their prior consultation, preparation, psychosocial support, or due regard for the suffering accumulated over many years of uncertainty regarding the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones.

We are further concerned by allegations that individuals who were forcibly disappeared in geographically distant regions are now reportedly being associated with a mass grave located in the capital, without any clear and detailed explanation being provided either to affected families or to the broader public. This has reportedly raised serious questions regarding the methodology used, the reliability of preliminary conclusions, and the transparency of the investigative process.

We further emphasize that international human rights law and standards require that families of forcibly disappeared persons be treated as rights-holders and active participants in processes aimed at clarifying the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones. This includes their right to timely, accurate and transparent information concerning the progress of investigations, the recovery and identification of remains, and the scientific methodologies employed. Families should be consulted and meaningfully involved throughout the process and provided with adequate psychosocial support and protection against re-traumatization. Given the profound suffering caused by prolonged uncertainty, authorities should ensure that information is communicated in a sensitive and dignified manner, avoiding actions that may generate unnecessary distress, confusion or false expectations. Respect for the dignity of victims and their relatives requires that forensic and investigative processes be conducted in a manner that promotes trust, transparency and healing, while respecting the dignity of the dead and safeguarding the right to truth owed both to families and to society as a whole.

In this regard, and as those individuals buried in the mass graves may have been subjected to summary executions, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance as well as acts of torture, we wish to bring to your Excellency's Government attention to the international human rights norms and standards that States must comply with under international law (See Annex). We notably underscore the importance of conducting investigations into all suspected unlawful deaths in line with international standards, particularly the [*Principles on Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-Legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions*](#) and, very especially in this case, the Revised United Nations Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-Legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions (the [*Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of a Potentially Unlawful Death \(2016\)*](#)). The Minnesota Protocol offers detailed guidance to the highest

international standards for the recovery, analysis and documentation of human remains, as required for the investigation of potentially unlawful deaths. As well as the Guiding Principles for the search for disappeared persons, in particular its principles 2.4, 3.3, 7.3, 11.2, 11.4 and 12.4.

The respectful and lawful handling of mass graves, including forensic examinations, is an essential prerequisite for the investigation of potentially unlawful deaths in order to prevent future violations of the right to life, to clarify the fate and whereabouts of forcibly disappeared persons whose remains might be buried therein, to allow families to receive their loved one's remains for burial and/or dignified commemoration, and to determine the circumstances of the disappearance with a view to establishing the truth, which is owed to the families and to society as a whole.

In this context, we would like to emphasize that transitional justice processes require a firm commitment to truth, justice and reparation, and full respect for the dignity and memory of victims, including forcibly disappeared persons, and their relatives. We reiterate that the management of mass graves and the identification of human remains must be handled with the utmost sensitivity, professionalism and adherence to international human rights standards, in particular recognized forensic standards, ensuring the integrity of evidence, DNA analysis and proper chain-of-custody protocols. Transparent and impartial investigations and the protection of the site from outside interference are also of paramount importance to preserve the integrity of the remains, evidence and lines of enquiry. We also stress the importance of ensuring that such a sensitive process benefits from the participation and oversight of independent entities and specialized international organizations, including our own mandates for which we stand ready to offer technical advice and guidance, including on forensic matters. We stand ready to provide your Excellency's Government with any technical expertise it may require in this context.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide information about the measures taken or foreseen to preserve the mass grave site, to adequately perform the excavations and to respect and identify the human remains buried therein in accordance with international standards, and to inform family members of the victims of any progress in the investigative process in a timely manner.
3. Please provide information about the process of search, exhumation and identification of the remains of alleged victims of the "27 May" killings, and about the expertise, certification and reliability of the team of experts who conducted these operations and their compliance with standards

required for such investigations, in particular the Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016): The Revised United Nations Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions and the Guiding Principles for the search for disappeared persons.

4. Please provide information about the measures taken and envisaged to ensure that families of victims of the civil war including forcibly disappeared persons, are treated as rights holders, are fully informed in a timely and appropriate manner about the investigation conducted and its progress and receive full reparation for the harm suffered.

This communication, and any response received from your Excellency's Government, will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) at the 60 days mark. Should Your Excellency's Government respond within 60 days, both the communication and the response, may be published before the 60 days mark. The communications and responses will also be made available in the subsequent periodic report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Bernard Duhaime

Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence

Gabriella Citroni

Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

Morris Tidball-Binz

Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions

Annex

Reference to international human rights law

In connection with above alleged facts and concerns, and without prejudice to the accuracy of these allegations, we would like to draw the attention of your Excellency's Government to the relevant international norms and standards.

We would like to refer to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), acceded to by Angola on 10 January 1992, in particular articles 2, 6, 7, 9 and 16 read alone and in conjunction with article 2(3) and article 7 and 17 read alone and in conjunction with article 2(3) of the ICCPR with regard to the relatives of the disappeared person. which guarantee the right to remedy, the right to life and the right to liberty and security. Article 2 of the ICCPR notably establishes that States must guarantee that any person whose rights have been violated shall have an effective remedy, and that the competent authorities must enforce such remedies when granted. In its general comment No. 31, the Human Rights Committee established that States have an obligation to investigate and punish serious human rights violations, including summary or arbitrary killings, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and enforced disappearances (paragraph 18). Failure to investigate and prosecute such violations is in itself a breach of the norms of human rights treaties. Impunity for such violations can be an important element contributing to the recurrence of violations. Furthermore, with regard to the violation entailed by the failure to return mortal remains, we note that the Human Rights Committee has also affirmed that failure to return the remains amounts to a violation of article 7 and 17 of the ICCPR, read in conjunction with its article 2(3), as established in *Shedko v. Belarus* and *Mandic v. Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

Similarly, the Updated Set of Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights through Action to Combat Impunity provide that States have the duty to undertake prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigations of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law and to ensure that those responsible for serious crimes under international law are prosecuted, tried and duly punished (principle 19). Furthermore, the Guiding Principles for the Search for Disappeared Persons of the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances¹ establish that the body or remains of a disappeared person should be handed over to the family members under decent conditions (principle 2.4), the search should be governed by public policy and built on the basis of States' obligations to search (principles 3.3), in the event of death, the search may be considered as completed when the person has been fully identified in accordance with international standards (principles 7.3), States should establish registers and databases on disappeared persons (principle 11.2), registers and databases should be maintained even after the search has ended (principle 11.4), and States should take the necessary measures to guarantee the transfer of the knowledge and technology needed for search processes.

We wish to underscore that investigations of potentially unlawful killings must adhere to the relevant international standards, particularly articulated in the [Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of a Potentially Unlawful Death \(2016\): the revised](#)

¹ [CED/C/7*](#)

[version of the United Nations Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-Legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions](#). Among other provisions, the Protocol states that the recovery of human remains must be carried out under the supervision of forensic experts (para. 90), and identification must be carried out on the basis of scientifically reliable identification methods such as fingerprints, dental examination and DNA analysis (para. 120).

The Minnesota Protocol further recognizes the right of families to participate in investigations and to receive information concerning their progress and findings. It emphasizes that communication with families should be timely, transparent, compassionate and culturally appropriate, taking into account their vulnerability and the risk of re-traumatization (paras. 32-35 and 41). The collection and use of DNA reference samples from relatives should be based on informed consent and carried out in accordance with internationally recognized scientific standards and appropriate safeguards (paras. 123-126).

We also refer to the report on Medico-legal Death Investigations (MLDIs) (A/HRC/50/34) by the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, indicating that the bereaved families and next of kin should be informed in a timely and appropriate manner about the investigation into the death of their loved one, its progress and its findings and that should be protected from any threat resulting from their participation in the investigation (paras. 92 and 94). The report further emphasizes that families should be treated with dignity and respect and provided with appropriate psychosocial support, recognizing their particular vulnerability and the need to protect them from further harm. Families are not merely sources of information but rights-holders and active participants in efforts to clarify the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones. They should be consulted and meaningfully involved throughout the search, identification and investigative processes and receive timely, accurate and accessible information regarding the methodologies employed, the progress achieved and the findings obtained.

Likewise, the 2020 Bournemouth Protocol on Mass Grave Protection and Investigation also reminds that upon completion of the investigation, identification and justice processes, human remains, associated body parts and personal artefacts should be returned to family members, allowing them to dispose of the deceased in line with their belief.

Furthermore, we refer to the report on Mass graves, highlighting the multitude of sites of mass killings and unlawful deaths across history and the world ([A/75/384](#)) by the former Special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, establishing that “States must enable the participation of families in investigations into unlawful deaths and ensure that they obtain available information on the circumstances, events and causes of death, and the location and condition of the remains insofar as these have been determined” (paragraph 58). The adequate handling of mass graves also involves an obligation to respect religious and cultural rights (A/HRC/31/59, para. 21).

In addition, we would like to refer to the inalienable right of victims of human rights violations to know the truth about past events concerning the perpetration of heinous crimes and about the circumstances and reasons that led, through massive or

systematic violations, to the perpetration of those crimes, as established in the updated Set of Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights through Action to Combat Impunity of February 2005 (principle 2). Irrespective of any legal proceedings, victims and their families have the imprescriptible right to know the truth about the circumstances in which violations took place and, in the event of death or disappearance, the victims' fate (principle 4). Full and effective exercise of the right to the truth provides a vital safeguard against the recurrence of violations (principle 5). In this respect, we also refer your Excellency's Government's attention to the United Nations Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances, in particular to articles 13 and 19 and to the General comment on the right to the truth in relation to enforced disappearance, issued by the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (A/HRC/16/48, (para. 39), which reiterates that "[e]ach victim has the right to know the truth about violations that affected him or her, but the truth also has to be told at the level of society as a 'vital safeguard against the recurrence of violations' (....). The Working Group has often recommended that States adopt measures to promote truth, reparations for victims and reconciliation in their societies, as a means of implementing the right to the truth and the right to integral reparation for victims of enforced disappearances (A/HRC/RES/21/15, para. 3).

Finally, we would like to recall the right of victims of human rights violations to receive full reparation for the harm suffered. The Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law establish the right of victims to receive adequate, effective and prompt reparation for the harm suffered, and to have access to relevant information on reparation mechanisms (paragraph 11). Reparation should be proportional to the gravity of the violations and the harm suffered. Victims should be provided with full and effective reparation, which include the following forms: restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition (paragraphs 15 and 18). With regards to measures of satisfaction, these should include measures aimed at acknowledging the violations suffered by victims and the responsibility of the perpetrators, and at restoring the dignity of victims, including through a public apology, a public declaration restoring the dignity and rights of victims, and an accurate account of the violations they endured (paragraph 22).