

This Nation Is Banning Church Groups After Deadly Sect Clashes

Angola's government has banned nine church groups operating in central Huambo province, where the main opposition party said hundreds were killed this month in a police crackdown on a rebel Christian sect.

The Huambo provincial government and the national police have declared the fringe Christian groups illegal under new rules that require denominations to have 100,000 registered members spread across at least a third of Angola's 18 provinces, the state-run Jornal de Angola said.

Rights groups say the bans are an example of the increasing suppression of civil liberties and freedom of speech under President Jose Eduardo dos Santos, who has ruled the mostly Catholic southern African country for 36 years.

"Government has control over the main church movements and it understands what influence they have," said Elias Isaac, country director at the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa.

"When you no longer belong to the formal system that the government feels it can control, you become a threat."

The bans come two weeks after Angolan police said nine of its officers were shot dead during raids in Huambo province aimed at capturing Jose Kalupeteka, leader of the illegal sect "The Light of the World", which has an estimated 3,000 members.

Police said popular anti-authority preacher Kalupeteka was later captured and only 13 sect members were killed.

However, the main opposition party UNITA said police and

military killed more than 1,000 civilians in a backlash against the millenarian sect, which predicts the world will end on Dec. 31 and discourages engagement with politics.

Reuters has been unable to verify the number of deaths as the area around the incident has been cordoned off, making it difficult to speak to witnesses or anyone from the sect.

Officials have accused the group of mistreatment, including sending young members out to live in isolation and discouraging people from being inoculated against polio.

UNITA accuses security forces of orchestrating the violence to suppress planned nationwide anti-government demonstrations.

AmAngola, an organization supportive of dos Santos, has organized a rally against The Light of the World this weekend in Huambo, a traditional UNITA stronghold.

Angola, Africa's second largest crude exporter and a key oil supplier to China, still suffers from sporadic violence as it recovers from a 27-year civil war, which ended in 2002.

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