

## Observers praise Angola's election campaign

by Fran Blandy Thu Sep 4, 7:51 AM ET

**LUANDA (AFP)** - Poll observers in Angola have praised the country's election campaign ahead of Friday's ballot despite harsh criticism from human rights organisations. Some eight million Angolans are registered to vote in the first peace time elections in Africa's biggest oil producer.

The battle is between the ruling left-wing Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, which has been in power for over 30 years and the former UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) rebel movement. In the run-up to the vote UNITA has complained of intimidation and violence against its supporters. Its concerns were echoed by human rights organisations.

Election observers from the European Union and Southern Africa missions, however, praised the run-up to the vote in a press conference late Wednesday. The chief of the EU observer mission team said the campaign had been very smooth, but admitted the oil-rich country's press had reported heavily in favour of the ruling MPLA of president Jose Eduardo dos Santos.

"Up until now the process was a real step forward for democracy. I was really impressed by the fact that all parties were calling for an electoral campaign that will be tolerant and they all spoke of freedom of expression and the right to choose," EU mission chief Luisa Morgantini, who heads a team composed of around 100 short and long-term members, told AFP.

John Kunene, the head of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) observer mission which has some 200 observers in place, added that he believed "that the conditions for free and fair elections are in place."

The SADC mission - criticised after declaring elections in Zimbabwe free and fair before the release of election results which caused a deepening of the political crisis in the country - said it was impressed by the openness of all political parties.

On Wednesday US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) group said the election would not be fair because the ruling party has received massive state funding and media coverage.

"During the pre-campaign period, Human Rights Watch documented abuses including intimidation of the opposition and media, interference in the electoral commission, and violent incidents against the opposition," it said in a statement.

The EU observer mission conceded that media coverage was a "real problem". "We can see clearly that they are giving more space to the ruling party," Morgantini said.

The MPLA and UNITA both held their final rallies Wednesday to mark the end of the campaign.

Nearly half of the country's 17 million population has registered to vote in Friday's election, the first since an aborted attempt in 1992 held during a lull in a devastating 27-year civil war which ended only six years ago.

Despite using massive oil and diamond reserves to become one of the world's fastest growing economies, two-thirds of Angola's population lives on less than two dollars a day.

The MPLA has dominated the campaign with state media broadcasting extensively on the reconstruction of the country and the achievements of Dos Santos who has been in power since 1979.

UNITA has promised change and a more equal division of the countries oil wealth.