

Observers unsure on Angola poll

The head of an EU observer

mission has said Angola's landmark elections represent an advance for democracy but refused to call them free and fair.

Luisa Morgantini said reports by one EU observer of vote-rigging in the enclave of Cabinda would be investigated. The ruling MPLA dismissed the reports.

Other election observers have said the vote was transparent.

With about three-quarters of the votes counted, the MPLA had 82% and the opposition Unita party 10.5%.

Final provisional results of the parliamentary poll were due on Monday.

The elections are the first in Angola for 16 years, and are seen as a crucial step in the country's recovery from decades of civil war.

Legal challenge

Voting passed off peacefully on Friday, but organisation in parts of the capital, Luanda, was chaotic and there was an unscheduled second day of polling in some areas.

Unita has demanded a re-run in Luanda and is challenging the legality of the poll in the constitutional court.

"The election marks a critical step for democracy despite the organisation difficulties. The Angolan people participated actively and voted freely," the EU mission said in a statement.

Speaking from Brussels after his return from Angola, Richard Howitt told the BBC's Today programme that more than 300 polling stations in the capital did not open or lacked materials.

He welcomed the elections, but said observers should not cover up flaws "that sent warning

signals about the kind of government we might see in this country in the future".

The observer mission had heard reports of people being bussed over the border to the Angolan enclave of Cabinda from neighbouring Congo-Brazzaville to vote, he said.

"After a fairly tortuous journey... we came across the most phenomenal scene, where tents, marquees, beds, lavish food was

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Richard Howitt, EU observer mission

there, and up to 1,500 people, five of whom we interviewed, and gave us evidence that this was all funded by the government."

Mr Howitt said there had been "massive hand-outs" of money, televisions, radios, alcohol, and even cars.

Voters had to pass soldiers lined up three-deep at the entrance to one polling station, he said.

"I personally saw representatives of the ruling party standing not just in the polling station, but in front of the booths where people were voting," Mr Howitt said.

'Transparent vote'

Senior MPLA official Osvaldo Amaro dismissed the reports. "There is no possibility of someone coming from another country and voting here," he told the BBC's Focus on Africa programme.

He acknowledged there had been organisational problems in the capital, but said everyone had been given a chance to vote and no re-run was necessary.

Ms Morgantini said Mr Howitt's allegations would be analysed in detail in the EU mission's final report in two months.

She said the EU would not declare the poll invalid, but repeatedly refused to call the elections free and fair.

Earlier, observers from the regional grouping, Southern African Development Community (Sadc), said the vote had been "transparent and credible".

A member of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries observer mission also said that despite logistical problems, the vote had been transparent.

Though Unita is challenging the conduct of the poll, party leader Isaias Samakuva said democracy had prevailed.

"Our country has completed an important step for the consolidation of our fragile democracy," he said.

"From now on, each government is only going to last four years, not more than 33 years."

In the lead-up to the election, Unita accused the MPLA of intimidating its supporters and dominating state media.

Some eight million voters are registered in the country - more than a quarter of whom live in the capital.

The MPLA has ruled Angola since the country gained independence from Portugal in 1975 but it fought a civil war against Unita until 2002.