

Angolan police arrest opposition members before vote

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LUANDA (Reuters) - Angolan police arrested several members of an opposition party on Thursday on the eve of national elections after they tried to enter the electoral commission building to demand credentials to observe the vote at polling stations, a party official and police said.

William Tonet, a candidate for the opposition CASA-CE party, told Reuters that police guarding the national electoral commission (CNE) in Luanda fired shots to keep back dozens of young CASA-CE militants who approached the building.

About a dozen party members were taken away by police, Tonet said. A police officer at the Quarta Esquadra police station near the electoral commission told Reuters several CASA-CE members were arrested but he could not confirm shots were fired.

Tonet said no one was hurt in the incident, which followed a month of generally peaceful campaigning.

Angolans are due to go to the polls on Friday to elect a new parliament and president in the second national elections held since the end a decade ago of a 27-year civil war in Africa's second biggest oil producer.

The ruling MPLA party, which easily defeated opponents in the last elections four years ago, is widely expected to win Friday's vote and achieve the re-election of party leader and Angolan President Jose Eduardo dos Santos, who has ruled the southern African country for nearly 33 years.

But opposition parties like CASA-CE and the former rebel group UNITA have complained of alleged irregularities in the electoral process, saying the CNE has failed to issue requested credentials for thousands of their representatives to be able to observe voting and the counting of ballots in 10,000 polling stations across the country.

The country's electoral laws allow for such observation by party representatives at polling stations.

"We were going to the national elections commission to demand credentials for our members," Tonet said, adding that out of the 6,850 credentials requested by CASA-CE, the electoral commission had issued only 3,000. UNITA has made similar complaints about credentials not being issued.

Several diplomats from Western embassies in Luanda also said they had requested credentials to observe the elections but had not received them from the commission.

There was no immediate response to the allegations from electoral officials, who have said the country is ready to hold the vote on Friday.

(Reporting by Shrikesh Laxmidas and Pascal Fletcher; Editing by Myra MacDonald)

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