

As Angola nears free elections, pope's visit seen as victory

By COLIN DARCH
Special to the National Catholic Reporter

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil — As Angola prepares for the historic visit of Pope John Paul II, there are increasing signs of a desire, on the part of the ruling MPLA Party, for a rapprochement with the traditionally right-wing local Catholic church. But it is still unclear what the reaction of conservative local bishops will be to these overtures from their formerly Marxist rulers.

While the country moves uncertainly toward its first-ever free elections, after decades of warfare, the pope's visit, scheduled for June 4-10, is seen officially by the government as a victory, "not just for Catholics, but for all Angolans." Angolan President Jose Eduardo dos Santos has declared that he wants to use the visit "to allow Angolan Catholics to feel

ditionally church-oriented subjects as "moral and civil education."

In January, the president gave a lengthy interview to the Portuguese Catholic magazine *Familia Crista* (*Christian Family*). When the issue came out, the Angolan government bought 50,000 copies, which were distributed free of charge throughout the country. In the interview, Soviet-educated dos Santos said the church, as "one of the few organized forces that kept alive people's hope for a peaceful solution to the conflict," had an important role to play in the future democratic Angola.

In a later interview, on the Portuguese Catholic station Radio Renascenca, the Angolan president told listeners that "there have been moments when these relations (between church and state) have been difficult, especially in the first years after independence." But, he said, since 1979 things have steadily im-

proved. The government has returned church and school buildings, he added, and is counting on the Catholic church, especially in the area of education.

It is clear that some government concessions are attempts to gain support for the upcoming elections, scheduled for late September. The opposition group UNITA, which waged an armed struggle against the formerly Marxist MPLA government until a U.S.-sponsored peace agreement was signed in May last year, is conventionally regarded as linked to Protestant missionary groups who were active in the south of the country during colonial times.

hit an all-time low. ■

15/5/92

Angola's Catholics make up an estimated 38 percent of the population, and Protestants constitute 15 percent.

proved. The government has returned church and school buildings, he added, and is counting on the Catholic church, especially in the area of education.

It is clear that some government concessions are attempts to gain support for the upcoming elections, scheduled for late September. The opposition group UNITA, which waged an armed struggle against the formerly Marxist MPLA government until a U.S.-sponsored peace agreement was signed in May last year, is conventionally regarded as linked to Protestant missionary groups who were active in the south of the country during colonial times.

Angola's Catholics make up an estimated 38 percent of the population, and Protestants constitute 15 percent.

Angola's Catholics make up an estimated 38 percent of the population, and Protestants constitute 15 percent.