

**T**HE elections in Angola supervised by a UN mission were judged free and fair by the over 500 international observers who had unlimited access to the country and the electoral process. In some cases they had overseen the campaign, the production of the Electoral Act and voter registration as well as the election days and the count.

Despite this Unita called foul and threatened to return the country to a civil war. That action resulted in high levels of tension and gun battles in the capital. At the time of writing, the outcome is uncertain and the results have been delayed.

The elections in Angola were an example to South Africa of what was possible for a country seeking democracy despite civil war, poverty and human suffering.

After witnessing the elections as an invited international observer, it was clear that the Angolan people were committed to democracy as a way to resolve political conflict, competition and violence, although nervous as to the success of the venture.

While visiting small village polling sta-

## Election cannot replace a culture of democracy

**Idasa programme director PAUL GRAHAM was one of the large contingent of international observers at the Angolan elections.**

tions in the Bengo province outside Luanda, our team met a family walking away from the polls late on the afternoon of the first day. "Have you voted yet?" we asked. "No," came the reply, "but we will be leaving home earlier, at about 3.30 tomorrow morning, to be sure that we do."

Their attitude and the commitment to casting a vote was matched only by the care taken by the many thousands of specially trained electoral officials - who were doing everything for the first time - to ensure that the vote was fair and free.

We visited polling stations in ruined but operating schools, church halls and, in one case, a hut measuring three square metres.

The staff administered, with very rudimentary materials, two complex and beau-

tiful full colour ballots to a predominantly illiterate community. The only lapse in orderliness came when people felt they would not be able to vote.

So what went wrong? Unita, like any party, was at liberty to request an audit of the results and a recount if they suspect fraud. However, a lesson for us in South Africa is that an election cannot

replace a culture of democracy and a spirit of national reconciliation. These must be developed in other ways to ensure that a truly democratic election process is not undermined by resorting to violence, threats and a general unwillingness to accept defeat.

Whatever the final outcome of the election - for despite the tension a result will emerge with international support - the people of Angola will have spoken a clear message to their own leaders and to the leaders of neighbouring states: "However much we have fought, however much we have suffered, however poor or illiterate we may be, our vote is a symbol of the democracy and peace that is possible and which we want. Do not deny this vote."

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