JOHANNESBURG, 30 Jan 2004 (IRIN) - The widespread availability of ordinance left over from Angola's protracted civil war is fuelling a spate of personal vendettas, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said on Friday.

"There were three confirmed cases in which private citizens planted mines or other explosives to target others for personal revenge in December last year. Luckily, no one was killed or seriously injured. This is a rare but worrying practice on the part of a few individuals, who are taking advantage of the availability of explosives left over from years of war to deal with their disagreements in a radical way," OCHA information officer, Dawn Blalock, told IRIN.

Blalock noted that there had been 19 mine accidents in January alone, which was "more than usual". However, she stressed that the increase was attributed to seasonal rains and a "wider circulation of traffic throughout the country".

Since the end of the war in April 2002, the UN and civil rights groups have voiced concern over the number of small arms in circulation among civilians in Angola.

They warned that the widespread availability of light weapons could jeopardise the country's fragile peace, and posed a threat to holding peaceful national elections, tentatively scheduled for 2005.

Although there is no independent confirmation of exactly how many guns are in the hands of individuals, officials estimate that a third of Angolans are armed.

A government programme encouraging civilians to hand in their weapons was launched immediately after the 2002 ceasefire, but yielded less than 10 percent of the number believed to be in circulation.

"Destroying these caches of ammunition and mines, and promoting peaceful reconciliation is a priority for both the UN and the government of Angola. Fortunately, the majority of Angolans are focussed on moving forward in the reconciliation process, setting aside past grievances, and settling new ones peacefully," Blalock commented.