

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

UNITED NATIONS INTEGRATED PEACE BUILDING OFFICE IN SIERRA LEONE
(UNIPSIL)

The Mano River Union-National Electoral Commissioner's Meeting

Statement by Mr. Berhanemeskel Nega, Officer - In - Charge of UNIPSIL

12 September 2012

Minister for Political Affairs,
The Secretary General of MRU,
Members of the diplomatic corps
Chairpersons and members of the National Electoral Commissions from Liberia,
Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone
Civil Society Organizations,
Representative of UNOWA ERSG,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

Mr. Chairman, Please allow me to begin by congratulating the MRU, under the very able leadership of Dr. Kabba, for this initiative to bring together National Electoral Commissions from the four MRU countries, to exchange experience and to develop a sub-regional strategy on democratic elections. The United Nations is particularly pleased to partner with MRU in supporting this initiative, as it takes place in Freetown, at a time when Sierra Leone is preparing for the third post-conflict elections to be held on 17 November 2012.

Considering recent experiences of elections in the MRU member states, and their impact on the democratic transitions as well as the peace and stability of these countries, and indeed the sub-region as a whole, this meeting cannot be more timely.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

In as much as free and fair elections are one of the key yardsticks by which a democratic process in any country would be measured, the credibility of electoral commissions in managing elections is also a major requirement and indeed a precondition for the success of any electoral process. In that regard, constitutional provisions and related legal frameworks regulating the works of electoral management bodies, determine the scope of competence of such bodies. Lack of clarity or any gap in that regard could give rise to challenges and lead to disruption of an electoral process. Therefore, clarity in the legislative framework is essential.

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Indeed, while the authority of electoral commissions is governed and guided by constitutional and legislative frameworks of each country, there are also universally accepted standards and principles that are applicable to all electoral management bodies and electoral processes. In the same vein, the conditions in which electoral commissions operate in each country and external factors are also important considerations. In particular, the conduct of elections in post-conflict countries and those emerging out of authoritarian political systems present challenges, not only due to lack of capacity and the requisite resources, but also in terms of the yet to be developed level of political tolerance. Such, challenges could only be overcome through a collaborative approach involving all stakeholders in the process in a transparent manner.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

Any election draws its legitimacy from the will of the people, and the credibility of those who are responsible for the management such expression of will in a transparent, professional and impartial manner is equally important. In that regard, it is incumbent, therefore, on EMBs, in particular electoral commissions to contribute their part to creating an environment of trust and confidence and avoid even the perceptions of impartiality in the eyes of the key players and stakeholders in the electoral process.

That would require collaborative work with all the key stakeholders, in particular political parties, and maintaining effective line of communication and dialogue. Any adversarial relationship and misunderstanding needs to be mitigated and managed in a spirit of constructive engagement.

Equally important for the success of any electoral process is an effective coordination among EMBs and relevant national institutions, aimed at ensuring an enabling security, political environment as well as the necessary technical and logistics support.

Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;

Since the end of the conflict, Sierra Leone has witnessed two elections, respectively held in 2002 and 2007, and which were widely acclaimed as free and fair, and preparations for the third post-conflict elections are well underway. In the MRU region, Cote D' Ivoire, Guinea and Liberia had all held democratic elections recently or during the past two years, and parliamentary and local elections are scheduled in Guinea and Cote D'Ivoire in 2012. Notwithstanding the very encouraging culture of democratic elections we are witnessing taking roots in the sub-region; there have also been incidences of violence and related challenges causing instability not only in the country concerned, but also affecting neighboring countries.

Each commission participating in this meeting has peculiar experiences to share and to learn from each other, and this meeting will provide you an opportunity to examine ways and means to address the common challenges in managing democratic elections in the sub-region. .

Mr. Chairman,

Although elections are primarily an internal matter for national authorities and institutions, the international community is also playing an increasingly active role in supporting and monitoring such elections, especially in conflict and post conflict environments, including in the MRU countries. The United Nations in particular provides an electoral assistance as part of its peace operations' mandate and in support of democratic transitions in its member states. The role of the United Nations varies depending on particular circumstances and conditions in each country. In the absence of national institutions and in conflict or fragile post-conflict political and security environment, the United Nations' assistance and involvement is more visible, while, in other stable circumstances where functional national institutions exist, it supports the lead role of national electoral management bodies, including electoral commissions, thereby emphasizing the importance of national ownership of each country's political process.

In Sierra Leone, the United Nations provides support in the preparations and conduct of the 2012 elections, as mandated by the United Nations Security Council. With Sierra Leone's national institutions taking the lead, the UN support is focused primarily on managing the funding of the elections, through an Electoral Basket Fund, and providing technical advice, in promoting political dialogue, participation and non-violence, as well as in creating an enabling security environment for the elections. In that regard, the UN closely works with key Electoral Management Bodies in particular the National Electoral Commission, the Sierra Leone Police and Political Party Registration Commission, the Independent Media Commission, the National Commission for Democracy as well as Non-State Actors, such as political parties, youth and women's groups, traditional authorities, the inter-religious council, civil society, the media, and at the sub-regional level coordinates with the MRU.

Now, with the elections approaching, the United Nations, and indeed the rest of the international community, will continue to closely work with Sierra Leone's authorities and national institutions and all relevant stakeholders in supporting their efforts to ensure that the elections to be held on 17 November are free, fair credible and peaceful.

Mr. Chairman, with these remarks, I would like to conclude once again on behalf of the United Nations by thanking the MRU for this timely initiative and wishing the participants very successful deliberations.

I thank you.