

Statement made by Mr. Berhanemeskel Nega , Deputy Head of Mission and Chief Political Affairs, United Nations Integrated Peace building Office in Sierra Leone, at stakeholders dialogue on elections, conflict prevention and youth violence in the Mano River Union

26 July 2012

Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished Guests,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please permit me, first and foremost, to thank the organizers of this important conference for their timely initiative. I also wish to convey the good wishes of the Executive Representative of the Secretary-General, Mr. Jens Anders Toyber Frandzen, who was unable to be present here this Morning due to other pressing official matters.

This stakeholder's dialogue on the theme "elections, conflict prevention and youth violence in the Mano River Union" is indeed timely and relevant to the countries of the Mano River Union as a whole, and to Sierra Leone in particular, with the presidential, parliamentary and local elections, scheduled for 17 November 2012, approach.

It will also compliment and reinforce the commitments made by Sierra Leone's election stakeholders, including youth groups, with the signing of the Declaration of 18 May 2012. The Declaration stipulates the roles and responsibilities of all major elections stakeholders in ensuring non-violent, free and credible elections in November 2012, and serves as key yard stick by which the commitment of Sierra Leone's political actors will be judged. In view of that, the United Nations

Security Council has welcomed the Declaration, and will closely monitor its full implementation.

Mr. Chairman,

A very important aspect that this conference brings into the national discourse on non-violent and credible elections is the focus on the regional dimension of the role of youths and sharing experiences and lessons learned among the MRU countries on youth and electoral violence.

While circumstances in each of the MRU countries vary, there are, however, common challenges that require common solutions. Sierra Leone has more to offer in that regard, having held two successful post-conflict democratic elections and now preparing for its third. Cote d' Ivoire, Guinea and Liberia also have recently held multi party elections, and there are important lessons to be drawn from their experiences on the role and disposition of the youths in elections.

In so doing, the youth are often associated with violence and presented as risk factors during elections. While there are credible reasons for concern in that respect, we should, however, recognize that, considering the greater stakes they have in the future of their country, the youth could indeed serve as constituencies for peace and political tolerance and contribute to democratic transformation, peace and development. In that regard, we note the level of positive activism by the Sierra Leone youth aimed at ensuring violence free elections in November 2012.

As efforts at ensuring that the forthcoming elections in Sierra Leone are held in a peaceful environment continue, the longer-term challenges facing youth would require a holistic approach and strategy beyond addressing the symptoms and investing in stop-gap measures.

That would mean greater focus on broadening opportunities for youth in particular in the areas of education, employment and empowerment. Lack of such opportunities causes hopelessness and despair that turns the youth to an easy prey for unscrupulous politicians and even criminal elements.

In recognition of the vital role of Sierra Leone's youth in peace consolidation and the democratic process in the country, the United Nations has been working with the Government and various youth associations in support of national efforts.

The support provided to the All Political Parties Youth Association (APPWA) is one such example. The Association, during the past few years of its existence, has played an important role in mobilizing youth for peace and national cohesion. Despite current challenges, APPWA could present real opportunity for youths to work together in reducing political violence and also serve as major platform for conflict resolution and mediation and political tolerance

The Association has made its presence felt throughout the country in a number of ways including constituency outreach activities and the formation of executives at the constituency levels. It has also within the sub region been recognized through its participation in inter-party talks in Ghana, and the observation of recent elections in Liberia. These are modest beginnings to be built upon, and we look forward to the Association resolving its current challenges and continuing to play a vital role in Sierra Leone's democratic process.

The United Nations will also continue to work closely with and support the Mano River Union in various areas, including in promoting cross border security during the electoral period and beyond, where the youth could play an indispensable role.

With respect to the National Youth Commission, the United Nations welcomes the progress made in the commission's work and will continue its collaboration in providing technical support to enhance its operational capacity in the very short-term.

In concluding, Mr. Chairman, I would like once again to thank the organizers of this conference for the timely initiative and to assure them of the United Nations' continued support.