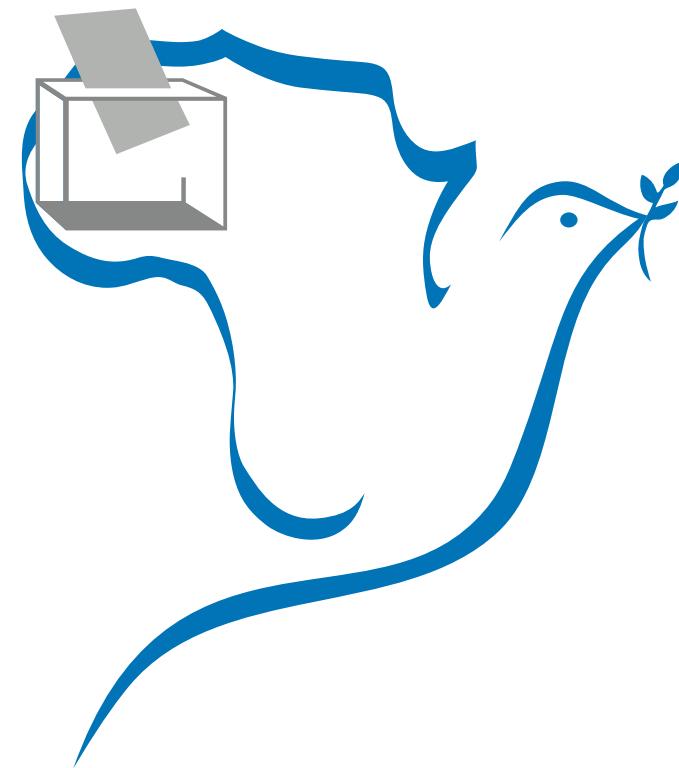**The Regional Conference on Elections and Stability in West Africa was held** from 18 to 20 May 2011 in Praia, Cape Verde. It aimed at analyzing the impact of electoral processes on stability and democracy in the sub-region as well as their implications in terms of crisis prevention and peacebuilding.

The participants exchanged on best practices and lessons learned from recent elections in West Africa. The Declaration of Praia on Elections and Stability in West Africa identifies practical recommendations to facilitate the conduct of peaceful elections.

The conference was organized by the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA) in collaboration with the Government of Cape Verde and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and with the support of the United Nations Department of Political Affairs and its Electoral Assistance Division, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU), the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), the European Union (EU), and the International Peace Institute (IPI).

PRAIA
DECLARATION
ON ELECTIONS AND STABILITY IN WEST AFRICA

United Nations Office For West Africa
UNOWA
Bureau des Nations Unies pour L'Afrique de l'Ouest

PRAIA DECLARATION ON ELECTIONS AND STABILITY IN WEST AFRICA

Adopted by the Regional Conference on Elections and Stability
held in Praia, Cape Verde (20 May 2011)

I. A Regional Conference on Elections and Stability was convened in Praia, Cape Verde from 18 to 20 May 2011. The conference, hosted by the government of Cape Verde, was organized by the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA), in partnership with the UNDP regional office, with the support of the United Nations Department of Political Affairs and its Electoral Assistance Division, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU), the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), the European Union (EU), and the International Peace Institute (IPI). Participants including high-level representatives of West African states, international and regional organizations, as well as representatives of election management bodies, national security forces, civil society, academic institutions and the media, examined the situation of elections in West Africa, focusing on the impact of electoral processes on democracy and stability and its implications for crisis prevention and peacebuilding.

II. Participants acknowledged that assisting state authorities in West Africa in holding peaceful, free, and fair elections has been at the core of United Nations and ECOWAS efforts aimed at strengthening democratic principles and processes in the sub-region. They underscored that the increasing number of competitive elections across the sub-region has contributed to strengthen democratic prospects, with some countries succeeding in organizing peaceful and credible elections, while in others, electoral processes have been marked by tensions and violence. They observed that shortcomings in the electoral administration such as partisan electoral management bodies, the lack of adequate mechanisms to manage electoral disputes and ensure inclusive representation, and financial gaps in the organization of elections are important factors of instability.

III. Participants reviewed successes and challenges of elections in the sub-region, including in relation to effective electoral assistance, the promotion and harmonization of regional norms and principles, and the integration of cross-cutting priorities pertaining to human rights, the security sector and the media, into the electoral management framework. They engaged in discussions on best practices and lessons learned from recent elections in West Africa including in Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Cape Verde, Niger, Benin, and Nigeria, and exchanged on the necessity to strengthen collaboration and consensus among all election stakeholders and for a holistic and sustainable approach to electoral processes.

The participants in the Regional Conference stressed the following:

A. The right to vote and to be elected is a fundamental human and constitutional right;

B. Setting conditions for credible electoral processes including holding and financing elections is the responsibility of state authorities;

C. National consensus is a key requirement to the elaboration and adoption of electoral laws, voters lists, electoral management bodies and other related mechanisms;

D. Elections goes hand in hand with building institutions and civic education to sustain democratic culture;

E. The alternation in government and time limitations of political mandates are cornerstones of democratic and electoral processes;

F. The critical role of political parties in electoral processes and their importance in enhancing democratic institutions;

G. The opposition has an important role to play in national politics both as the main interlocutor and challenger to the ruling party;

H. Election-related violence continues to be one of the major challenges to political stability in the sub-region;

I. Corruption, manipulation and rigging continue to plague a number of electoral processes in West Africa;

J. Free and fair elections, as a prerequisite for the peaceful transfer, of power are the cornerstone of democracy;

K. Democratically-controlled and impartial security forces are a precondition for the conduct of credible elections;

L. The critical role of civil society including women and the media in the delivery of credible elections in the sub-region;

M. The relevance of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance adopted in December 2001 to provide a concerted regional response to the growing challenge of election-related violence in West Africa;

N. The importance of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance adopted in 2007 as well as OIF Bamako Declaration adopted in 2000;

O. The importance of the Presidential Statement of the United Nations Security Council of 10 July 2009 on "peace consolidation in West Africa" stressing the need of holding transparent and open elections in respect to constitutional order.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants identified key prerequisites for elections to promote stability and agreed on the necessity to work together for the implementation of the following recommendations:

Elections and Crisis Prevention

1. Identify at-risk countries and areas by assessing the presence and seriousness of political and social problems; making efforts to address underlying grievances before elections and limiting their potential to ignite underlying grievances;

2. Special attention should be given to the role of youth during elections and their grievances, including unemployment, which should be addressed to avoid the use of youth as perpetrators of violence;

3. Promote cooperation and coordination between international partners involved in the resolution of electoral disputes including through appropriate mechanisms such as International Contact Groups;

4. Further encourage the UN-ECOWAS-AU partnership in conflict prevention as an effective tool of crisis management and mitigation;

5. Strengthen cooperation between UNOWA, OHCHR, ECOWAS, and governments to develop, in collaboration with electoral management bodies, a regional civil society and national human rights institutions capacity building program in electoral affairs;

6. Establish early warning mechanisms to monitor before, during, and after elections potential human right violations and enable a quick response with the participation of civil society, in particular women groups.

Electoral Assistance

7. Request that international electoral assistance is delivered in a manner appropriate to context, based on careful and comprehensive needs assessment and respecting national dynamics and ownership;

8. Ensure that international electoral assistance encourages sustainability by placing a priority on capacity building of national stakeholders and institutions in conformity to the electoral cycle approach as stated by the UN General Assembly Resolution 62/150;

9. Encourage electoral assistance providers to ensure that assistance is sustainable and cost effective, being understood that all West African states are expected to self-fund elections;

10. Urge the UN and all international electoral assistance providers to adopt a conflict prevention approach in the provision of electoral assistance; placing at the heart of their work the prevention of election-related conflicts and advice that can facilitate political stability;

11. Set up mechanisms for regular consultation among national stakeholders;

12. Facilitate the establishment of adequate state mechanisms and regulations to finance political parties and electoral campaigns in order to promote equitable participation in electoral processes;

13. Prevent the financing of political parties and their campaigns by criminal networks, in particular drug trafficking networks.

Norms and Principles of Electoral Processes

14. Ensure that constitutional, legal and regulatory frameworks that reflect international best practices and norms are implemented including the respect of equal treatment of candidates and political parties;

15. Perform a periodic evaluation of the implementation of the ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance;

16. Ratify the African Union Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and relevant regional instruments, and put into place mechanisms to monitor and enforce compliance with its principles;

17. Harmonize, at the regional level, normative and institutional arrangements governing elections with due respect to national political systems.

Electoral Administration

18. Continue to reinforce capacity building of electoral management bodies to support their effectiveness;

19. Develop capacity to promote political rights, and facilitate citizen access to voter registration processes on a continuous basis, as required by national law;

20. Facilitate the establishment of reliable electoral lists based on regular census by civil registry including through the use of appropriate technology;

21. Establish a regional educational centre in electoral administration to strengthen capacity of national election officers, and facilitate the dissemination of election-specific knowledge by research and training centres and networks in West Africa;

22. Continue to assess and reflect upon the staffing and mandates of Electoral Commissions in West Africa in order to improve their performances;

23. Promote transparency and consensus throughout the electoral process: before, during, and after Election-day;

24. Put in place appropriate mechanisms for the expeditious, just, and fair resolution of electoral disputes, and in this regard build capacities of the local judiciary in electoral dispute resolution;

25. ECOWAS should consider the possibility to conduct the monitoring of elections in its member states, when appropriate.

Elections and Cross-cutting Issues

A. Human Rights and Gender

26. Call greater attention to the importance of promoting gender equality in all economic, political, and social contexts and empowering women in the conduct of elections;

27. Ensure that electoral processes in West Africa are conducted in compliance with human rights norms and standards;

28. Guarantee freedom and equity of assembly, association and speech in electoral processes;

29. Ensure fair protection to all voters and candidates, in particular female candidates, against violence, intimidation and other forms of human rights violations;

30. Raise awareness of all state institutions involved in the electoral process to fulfill their obligations according to human rights instruments;

31. Build human rights capacity of all actors in the electoral process including through national public awareness, education and institutional development;

32. Establish and/or consolidate regional and national accountability mechanisms to ensure the full enjoyment of article 21 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international and African treaties pertaining to elections;

33. Implement the Regional Plan of Action on the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 adopted at the Regional Forum organized by the United Nations, ECOWAS, MRU and the AU in Dakar in 2010;

34. Take appropriate measures to promote women participation in elections and the election of women in public offices and within political parties.

B. Security Forces

35. Ensure the impartiality and neutrality of security forces during elections; ensure that priority is placed on protecting populations and safeguarding public goods as part of security forces commitment to a wider human security framework;

36. Emphasize the leading role of security institutions in maintaining law and order with military forces providing additional support on a need basis;

37. Strengthen national legal frameworks in order to specify the mandate, supervision, accountability, and operational management of security forces in electoral processes including the collaboration with all stakeholders;

38. Establish an ad hoc electoral security force to address fragile institutional context under the supervision of an integrated electoral security coordinating body;

39. Adjust the electoral security force and other security mechanisms to the specific context by: i) performing a comprehensive risk assessment; ii) establishing a chain of command providing for timely information and decision-making;

40. Teach, promote and respect the international norms and standards for public order in electoral periods, including on human rights notions;

41. Reinforce the cooperation between UNOWA and ECOWAS in the elaboration of a regional electoral security program to underpin capacity-building for security forces/services within the framework of a broader security system reform agenda;

42. Involve closely ECOWAS in the securitization of sensitive electoral processes;

43. Use lessons learned in securing elections as an entry point to security sector reform.

C. The Media

44. State-owned and private media - including new media - must abide by codes of conduct in order to guarantee accurate and fair coverage of the electoral process including to political parties and independent candidates;

45. Provide adequate training to media, ensure that they have an official legal status, resources and equipment;

46. Freedom of expression should be guaranteed while holding the media accountable for biased reporting; reinforce the legislation against discriminations and incitements to hatred;

47. Involve media and journalists associations and unions in the definition of public policies related to media regulation and development;

48. Develop comprehensive media support strategies well in advance of elections, and monitor their implementation throughout the electoral process;

49. Ensure full independence of media regulatory bodies and guarantee resources to monitor and regulate media properly; develop tools to apply sanctions if necessary;

50. State authorities and civil society should conduct extensive public information campaign to inform citizens about the electoral process and their civic duties;

51. Facilitate synergies on a regular basis between the media and bodies in charge of election management;

52. Use new information technologies to facilitate the dissemination of election-related information and the reporting of irregularities;

53. ECOWAS should consider the possibility of establishing a regional media regulatory body, with due respect to freedom of expression.