

February 2018

To: Members of the Peacebuilding Commission, Sierra Leone Configuration

Subject: **Chair's visit to Sierra Leone, 11-13 December 2017**

Excellency,
Dear Colleagues,

Main Points of Discussion

The level of preparedness for the elections on behalf of the government and key institutions is on track and I was impressed by the commitment to peaceful elections by all actors. On the other hand, I also witnessed some suspicion, both among political parties and civil society, towards the various institutions involved in the organization and conduct of the elections, and heard reports of incidents of violence, including localized incidents during recent by-elections in several constituencies, and clashes between the youth wings of various political parties. During the discussions, I emphasized that all actions taken by the government, institutions, political parties, and other stakeholders would be perceived through the prism of the elections, and stressed the importance of open and clear communication and continuous dialogue with all stakeholders throughout the electoral process, in particular between political parties and electoral management bodies.

Election preparedness

Our overall impression was that there was a strong commitment for peace, and the importance of holding free, fair and credible elections towards that end was well understood. While the overall preparedness among all political actors was reassuring, our counterparts agreed that the management of election results could become a critical issue, as experienced recently in Kenya and Liberia. The stakes in the 2018 elections are perceived as high, particularly as President Koroma is stepping down from the Presidency after serving the constitutional maximum of two terms and the electoral result could be standard-setting for the decade to come.

I met with the National Electoral Commission (NEC), the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the National Commission for Democracy, as well as the police and security Forces. The meeting with the NEC included the Chair and its Executive Secretary, as well as the Commissioners responsible for two of the four regions of Sierra Leone. They commended the support of the international community to the NEC through UNDP. Acknowledging the various pressures to which NEC is exposed, the NEC Chair stated that the NEC was fully focused on meeting all milestones towards the polling date of 7 March. The Chair

and Commissioners, noting that it was normal that other electoral stakeholders would test

dence elections. NEC expressed relief that a reliable electoral timeline had been established, and underscored its close communication with political parties, including by convening fortnightly, issue-based meetings with them. However, NEC expressed concern at the sense of entitlement of political parties, who seemed not inclined to prepare themselves for the possibility of electoral defeat. The NEC further underscored the logistical challenges of organizing the elections, especially in remote areas, and stated their target was ensuring that at least 90 per cent of polling stations would open on time on Election Day. NEC further emphasized the vital role of the security sector in the electoral process, and the imperative for the police to remain independent.

NEC, as well as many other of the actors with which we met, expressed concern regarding the recent suspension of the weekly transfer of funds from the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development to NEC, worrying that the suspension was an at this critical point. However, NEC expressed confidence that the transfers of funds would resume in time to prevent a funding gap, and noted that it was responding pragmatically to the current situation. It should be noted that payments resumed following our visit.

Discussions with the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development underscored that the elections take place in an unfavorable economic climate marked by austerity measures. While conversations with IMF are still ongoing, IMF has withheld budgetary support on the basis of the government's failure to implement additional austerity measures. We expressed our hopes that further discussion with the IMF would lead to a positive outcome.

The security institutions, with the police as the lead agency, provided a comprehensive briefing on their election preparedness. At the technical level, an operational plan for the electoral process has been prepared, which prioritizes providing security to all political parties, engaging with youth, and increasingly cooperating with the media in regard to ensuring accurate information is shared with the public. UNDP, through funding from the Peacebuilding Support Fund (PBF) has worked with the Police to improve their level of preparedness to respond to threats to electoral security, by supporting the establishment and equipment of police command and control centers at national and sub-national levels. Other actors highlighted the need for the police to further enhance crowd control capacities, with some

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(APC), which they claimed had not been attending PPRC meetings (and which, regrettably, did not participate in the meeting). The parties also expressed concerns about the independence of NEC following the pause in transfer of funding, as well as the recent reshuffling of the security sector. The meeting reaffirmed the sense from previous visits of mentality regarding the election, as well as relatively low capacity of parties. We discussed the need to strengthen the role of political parties and particularly the opposition, regardless of which party wins, and encouraged all parties to

The role of youth

The role of youth, and how they are engaged in the elections, is of tremendous importance for a peaceful election outcome, and concerns were raised over a number of violent incidents that had already taken place. Representatives across meetings highlighted the need for the political leadership to act responsibly in its engagement with youth, and to refrain from instigating violence. Several representatives raised concerns that political parties were using youth (including children), including through providing them with drugs and alcohol at rallies. The rallies were a source of concern, where anyone wearing a particular color could be misinterpreted as a supporter of a particular political party, risking abuse from members of other parties. Several suggestions were made as to how youth could be engaged positively around the elections, for example by engaging them in the election monitoring.

Post-elections and conflict prevention

Electoral results management, especially if the election results are tight, will be key for a peaceful election aftermath. It is crucial that all actors have faith in the process and accept the results. International partners highlighted the need for parties to agree to the result management. NEC expressed its confidence that any electoral disputes that may arise could be managed by the judiciary, noting that they had already successfully settled various electoral disputes with both the APC and SLPP in the recent past. To this end, the PBF-funded Conflict Pre

by individual(s) in meetings, speeches or by publications to disturb the tranquility of the state by way of bringing hatred, contempt, or excite disaffection against the government or public authority putting journalists at risk of being persecuted for their reporting, thus constituting a major infringement on the freedom of speech. The meeting with media also raised concerns about the use of social media to spread rumors and misinformation, and I stressed the importance of a free press in ensuring that the public was accurately informed about the political process.

My meeting with the private sector highlighted the challenges Sierra Leone faces in diversifying its economy, particularly in access to capital and lack of infrastructure. Investors perceive Sierra Leone as risky, and the recent IMF review could have a further negative impact on the confidence on outside investors. There are many opportunities, most obviously in fishing, agriculture and mining sectors for example, Sierra Leone imports most of its rice from China, leaving valuable arable unused, despite the ability to produce excellent locally-grown rice. However there are significant challenges in building value chains, ranging from infrastructure, reliable and affordable access to energy, the regulatory environment, and complex land tenure laws. I expressed the view sector.

Next steps

I intend to remain in regular contact with all partners as the elections approach, including the Government of Sierra Leone through its mission in New York, the Resident Coordinator and Peace and Development Advisor in Freetown, SRSG Chambas and the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel, and other counterparts. Several partners are deploying electoral observers, including AU, ECOWAS, the European Union, and the Carter Center, and we commend the efforts by international partners resident in Sierra Leone to closely coordinate on messaging and priorities in their interactions with the government, political parties, and electoral management bodies.