

Presentation by Ms. Angela Kane
United Nations Assistant-Secretary-General for Political Affairs
on the occasion of the opening of
the Global Electoral Organizations Conference

Washington, DC, 27 March 2007

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished panelists,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a particular pleasure to be in Washington for this fourth Global Electoral Organizations conference. Such a gathering is an appropriate testament to the role of elections as a fundamental prerequisite for any democracy. More governments today have been chosen by competitive elections than at any time in history. This symbolizes important gains in human rights, freedom and choice.

It is particularly appropriate for this meeting to be convened here in Washington. The US Government has actively supported elections and democracy throughout the world in its actions, statements and its funding priorities. In 2005, following a proposal by President Bush, the United Nations Democracy Fund was created, and that fund now has received more than US\$ 41 million, with the United States a top donor. Currently, 125 projects have been funded supporting projects to enhance civic education, democratic dialogue and

civil society empowerment. The fund also gives me a chance to mention the institutional host of this conference: IFES. The United Nations Democracy Fund has signed an agreement establishing IFES as a privileged partner of the FUND in setting policy and funding priorities.

The creation of the United Nations Democracy Fund is a recent addition to the United Nations efforts in the promotion of democracy. Our participation in events such as this is also an expression of the United Nations commitment, and of course the Electoral Assistance Division of the Department of Political Affairs is a member of the GEO Steering Committee and has been since the first meeting in 1999.

We are proud of our place at this podium. The United Nations has been promoting elections and democracy for decades, sometimes with only the half-hearted support of some Member States, but always with a sense that the promotion of international peace and the defence of human rights was not only compatible with democratization, but was ultimately dependent on it.

In our bias for our own times, it is easy to forget how long the United Nations has been involved in efforts around the world to promote democratic practices. Let me recall that in the aftermath of World War II, General Assembly resolutions established commissions to observe elections in Korea. Between 1948 and 1969, the U.N. commissions in Korea observed 15 South Korean elections and referenda—though the techniques of observation were primitive compared to what we now deploy. In Germany, a commission was established to determine whether conditions were appropriate for elections there. The Commission was welcomed in the west but not in the east. While these efforts in Korea and Germany soon

became victims of international rivalries, they nonetheless established a blueprint that would later be picked up upon. In the context of decolonization, we have a mandate under Articles 73 and 74 of the United Nations Charter to assist people under colonial domination to achieve self-determination. And this work is not over: just last year, a referendum was held for the people of Tokelau. One of the lessons we learned from that particular exercise was: (i) do not hold the referendum in the hurricane season, and (ii) do not send observers who suffer from sea-sickness!

In the late 1980s, efforts to end the civil wars in Central America included elections as part of the peace settlements. In 1989, the Secretary-General accepted a request to monitor the 1990 post-conflict elections in Nicaragua. This was the beginning, one could say, of the modern generation of electoral operations.

It was around that time, 20 years ago exactly, that our host here today, IFES, was created. In the early days, they too focused on the Central American region. We have grown together during the past two decades, working together and benefitting from each other's experiences and lessons learned, conducting projects in all areas of the world. And these two decades—there should be no mistake about it—have been extremely intense when it comes to democratization.

When IFES was founded, few expected the wave of elections that would shortly take place in Eastern Europe. But we have now, sitting also at this podium, Dr. Zoltan Toth, the Chairman of the Association of Central and Eastern European Electoral Officials, with its 21 members. We should recall that the ACEEEO was the host of the last GEO conference, in Hungary in 2005. You will note also from the programme that representatives from the Association will speak on topics such as electoral technology, voter participation, and the development of electoral professionals.

The early 1990s also saw a new “wave” of elections in Africa, sometimes called a “second liberation”. The 1994 election in South Africa, to begin with, was an advance for democracy in its truest sense. It not only allowed all the people to choose their government, but it also removed a legal system built on the inequality of citizens—a notion totally anathema to the democratic idea. I know that there are here several representatives from the Electoral Commission of Ghana. Ghana is a particularly good example of the success that can be achieved when an electoral commission is able to respond to calls by civil society for improved electoral processes. The reform that began in Ghana with the 1996 elections continued, and now Ghana’s voter registration system, for example, could be a model for other countries in the world.

Most recently we have seen a surge in electoral activity in the Middle East. The Iraqi elections drew much international attention, as did the Palestinian elections. The results of the latter created an interesting dilemma: the work of the electoral commission was so professional that the results of the election could not be disputed, no matter how uncomfortable those results became to some. Given the political stakes in that region, this constitutes especially high praise for the electoral commission.

During these intense two decades, a cadre of international electoral professionals has emerged and a set of standard practices has been established. More and more, international electoral assistance has become a *métier*. It has developed specialties and, increasingly, more formalized methods of transferring information from the guild-masters, as it were, to the apprentices.

This meeting here in Washington, however, is another important way of sharing information. It has been eighteen months since the last GEO meeting, and even in that relatively short time, much has happened. Elections have been held, lessons have been learned, new ideas are being tried, old practices are being replaced by more modern ones, often involving machines that need to be tested. The world of elections is a dynamic world indeed, in which trends in politics, sociology, technology and psychology constantly interact. It is good, once in a while, to interrupt our work, sit down as professionals, and compare notes on what has worked and what has not, what is worth trying and what seems like a bad idea.

I will end on this idea, but with a special emphasis. I want to emphasize the potential flow of knowledge between emerging democracies and established democracies. Established democracies have a lot to teach the newer democracies. Their longevity is proof of their effectiveness, and when something as politically volatile as democracy lasts for a long time, it is not by accident. At the same time, however, we can notice what has been termed a sclerosis in the older democracies—evidenced by low voter participation and polls that indicate popular frustration with governments. Improving this situation could require some form of electoral reform, and there are numerous examples in emerging democracies on how to conduct electoral reform in a way that reaffirms the essence of democracy, rather than simply redistributes power among existing power holders. What I mean by the essence of democracy is, of course, the notion of “making every vote count.” This means not only ensuring that every vote is counted by electoral officials, but that every vote is an expression of an informed choice among real options, and that this expression is an individual choice, deliberately made by as many voters as possible. This is a small thing to say and a very big thing to do. But I cannot imagine a more impressive gathering of experience and expertise than that present in this room to address the challenge.

I wish you a fruitful meeting.