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Elections and reunification key challenges for Côte d'Ivoire, says UN envoy

17 March - The long-awaited and much-delayed presidential elections as well as reunification are the key issues for Côte d'Ivoire, the top United Nations envoy there said today, lamenting what he described as a "serious weakening" of the momentum toward holding polls.

Côte d'Ivoire, which became split by civil war in 2002 into a rebel-held north and Government-controlled south, was supposed to hold the elections as far back as 2005. The polls have been repeatedly postponed, most recently from 29 November last year to this March. A new date has not yet been set.

"It is quite regrettable to see the elections once again delayed," Y. J. Choi, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Côte d'Ivoire, told the Security Council today.

"Our disappointment is all the more acute as elections which have been prepared for so long appeared within our grasp at the time of the establishment of the provisional electoral list last November, which was highly credible and well balanced."

The West African nation was making progress last year toward holding the elections, including the publication of the provisional electoral list throughout the country, the launch of the appeals process, and the validation of all major candidates for the presidential election.

Mr. Choi noted that the political impasse that started in early January this year following the production of the second



Secretary-General's Special Representative for Côte d'Ivoire Choi Young-jin

electoral list resulted in “serious weakening of the electoral momentum.”

Political tensions began to mount after voter registration was suspended due to violence and President Laurent Gbagbo dissolved the Government and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) in February.

The provisional electoral list published in November by the IEC had about 5.3 million confirmed people and around 1 million people who still need to be confirmed.

“This list is good in principle, and we have to select out those people who are not Ivorians,” Mr. Choi told reporters after the Council meeting, referring to the 1 million people who need to be confirmed. The appeals process, which was due to begin in early March, has yet to start owing to recent political events, he added.

“We will work with all protagonists to produce the definitive electoral list as expeditiously as possible because this is indispensable step towards the presidential election.”

While tensions have eased, the Special Representative warned that “the current election-reunification dynamics may cause additional violent demonstrations and casualties.”

As agreed by the parties in 2008, a de facto reunification is to be completed two months prior to the presidential election.

Mr. Choi said that the UN peacekeeping mission in Côte d’Ivoire (UNOCI), which he heads, has set three objectives for the immediate future: maintaining peace and stability; safeguarding past achievements, including the provisional electoral list; and establishing a definitive electoral list as expeditiously as possible.

Top UN officials have repeatedly called on the Ivorian parties to resolve the challenges related to the delayed elections through dialogue, within the framework of the Ouagadougou Peace Agreements, the 2007 blueprint for political reconciliation forged in the capital of neighbouring Burkina Faso.

In a statement read out to the press after the meeting by Ambassador Emmanuel Issoze-Ngondet of Gabon, which holds the Council’s presidency for this month, the Council urged the Ivorian stakeholders to bring their full support to the work of the IEC in order to complete the final voters list in the coming weeks.

“The members of the Security Council called upon all Ivorians to refrain from the use of violence and to respect the full rights of their compatriots, including during the electoral process,” the statement added.

Spanish actor Antonio Banderas’ latest role: UNDP Goodwill Ambassador



Actor Antonio Banderas at UN Headquarters in 2009

17 March - Spanish actor Antonio Banderas is joining tennis superstar Maria Sharapova, soccer legend Zinedine Zidane and others as a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), it was announced today.

In his latest role, Mr. Banderas will advocate for the poor and push for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), eight globally-agreed targets with a 2015 deadline to halve world poverty, with a focus on Africa and Latin America.

“Poverty robs us of our potential as a people, preventing us from being all that we can be,” he said, underscoring the importance of mobilizing all efforts to tackle the scourge.

Yesterday, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched a new report, entitled *Keeping the Promise*, in which he unveils a new action plan aimed at getting governments, civil society actors, private businesses, philanthropy and the multilateral system to act “efficiently, effectively and collectively.”

With just five years to go before the 2015 deadline, he said that progress has been uneven and without an accelerated action plan several Goals are likely to be missed in many countries.

“Despite hard economic times, despite lagging progress on many fronts, we can still achieve the Millennium Development Goals by our target date of 2015,” he told reporters at his monthly press conference in New York.

With a decade of efforts towards achieving the MDGs already under the world’s belt, “we know what works and what doesn’t,” with lessons learned on how to best utilize new technologies, national development policies and better governance, he noted.

As Goodwill Ambassador, Mr. Banderas hopes to raise the profile of the MDG Achievement Fund, set up in 2006 with a \$700 million contribution by Spain to accelerate progress on reaching the Goals.

UNDP Administrator Helen Clark welcomed the actor’s appointment. “His proven commitment to the causes of the less fortunate make him an ideal advocate for our work,” she said.

A passionate football fan, he said he is thrilled to join the ranks of Mr. Zidane and Didier Drogba, also UNDP Goodwill Ambassadors.

Guatemala and UN launch scheme to fight organized crime



National anti-crime programme in Guatemala, where over 6,000 illegal firearms were destroyed

17 March - The top United Nations drug and crime official and Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom oversaw the destruction of some 6,000 illegal firearms today at the launch of a national programme to fight organized crime in a country that has a gun for every 10 people.

“Corruption, poverty and poor criminal justice capacity make Guatemala extremely vulnerable to organized crime,” said Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

“In turn, crime scares off investors and tourists, deepening the under-development that attracts crime. It’s time to break this vicious circle before it breaks Guatemala,” Mr. Costa added at the launch of the National Integrated Programme on the Strengthening of the Rule of Law, Security and Justice in Guatemala.

The three-year programme – worth \$16 million – is designed to strengthen Guatemala’s capacity in the areas of criminal justice, police reform, anti-corruption, firearms control, prison reform, cybercrime, and human trafficking.

Cocaine and other drugs are having an impact in the Central American country located between the Andean region, the world’s top producer of coca, and the United States, the top consumer. The same routes used to smuggle drugs are used to smuggle migrants and weapons.

As part of the programme, UNODC will establish a Centre of Excellence on Organized Crime in Guatemala City.

The Centre will support the development of applied research, data collection and analysis on crime trends, and provide training to national and regional authorities on counteracting organized crime.

Guatemala will join a regional network of Centres of Excellence, including centres for: urban crime prevention (El Salvador); maritime security (Panama); and drug demand reduction and prison reform (the Dominican Republic).

Mr. Costa appealed to funding partners to provide the resources needed to implement the full range of activities designed to strengthen security and justice.

The Programme will be jointly implemented by the Government and UNODC, and complement related activities being

carried out by the International Commission against Impunity (CICIG) and the Central American Integration System (SICA).

UNESCO chief saddened by fire and death at major Ugandan cultural site



Tombs of Buganda Kings at Kasubi
(UNESCO/Sébastien Moriset)

17 March - The head of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) today expressed her sorrow over the fire that destroyed the Tombs of Buganda Kings, a World Heritage List site in Uganda.

Two people were killed during protests sparked by anger at the destruction of the site yesterday.

Irina Bokova, UNESCO's Director-General, appealed for calm, saying the agency stands ready to help Ugandan authorities to assess damage and take remedial action to restore the religious site.

"The Tombs of the Buganda Kings at Kasubi is a World Heritage site of great cultural and spiritual significance. The destruction of this site is a tragic loss for the whole world," said Ms Bokova. "I am also deeply distressed to learn that two people lost their lives in protests that followed the fire, and hope there will be a swift return to calm at this difficult time," she said.

Located on the Kasubi Hill, five kilometres from Kampala city centre, the historic site, including four royal tombs, suffered extensive damage in the fire, whose cause has not yet been established. The site's buildings were made of dry grass thatch and wood and efforts to put out the fire were unsuccessful.

According to media reports, police shot two people in a crowd that staged a protest at the site suspecting that the blaze was an act of arson.

The Tombs of the Buganda Kings were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2001, recognized as "a masterpiece of human creativity and an eloquent manifestation" of the cultural traditions of the Baganda people, Uganda's largest ethnic group. The site has been an important centre of religious activity for the Baganda people since it was established in 1860.

UN experts push for independent review of Somali food programme



17 March - The Security Council should urge Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to initiate an independent investigation into the food distribution programme in Somalia, a United Nations group of experts recommends in a new report which claims that humanitarian officials divert food aid for military use.

"A handful of Somali contractors for aid agencies have formed a cartel and become important powerbrokers – some of whom channel their profits, or the aid itself, directly to armed opposition groups," the Security Council's Monitoring Group on Somalia alleged in its latest report on international compliance with UN sanctions against Somalia and Eritrea.

The report singled out the Adaani family, one of the three largest contractors for the World Food Programme (WFP) in Somalia, which has "long been a financier of armed groups," and which has ties with Hassan Dahir Aweys, the leader of the militia coalition Hizbul Islam.

The Monitoring Group also recommended that WFP revise its internal procedures to diversify how it issues contracts and work closely with other UN agencies and offices to share information about the Somali business community.

Looking to Mogadishu, the report criticized the war economy for corrupting and enfeebling State institutions under the leadership of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed.

The apparent corruption has spread to the Somali security services which sell their military supplies in open markets.

“The limited ability of the Transitional Federal Government to pay its officials and security forces is handicapped by entrenched corruption at all levels: commanders and troops alike sell their arms and ammunition – sometimes even to their enemies,” the report said.

The TFG’s survival is attributed not to its military but to support from the UN-backed African Union peace support operation known by its acronym AMISOM and clan militias that have turned against the rebel Al Shabaab militias.

In a related development, the TFG signed an agreement with a former rival group known as Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jama’a at the headquarters of the African Union (AU). Militias in Somalia are known to change allegiances frequently.

On the topic of piracy, which the Monitoring Group called “the most obvious symptom of the war economy,” it noted that attacks on shipping off Somalia increased in 2009, despite the presence of international naval forces offshore.

The report also cautioned against the increasing involvement of Somalia’s immediate neighbours, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya, which “are militarily involved in the conflict or plan to become involved in the coming months.”

The Monitoring Group singled out Eritrea to cease any subsidies to members of the armed opposition groups currently based in Asmara and cancel Eritrean passports issued to members of the group.

Western Sahara: UN envoy travels to region for talks



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon with his Personal Envoy for Western Sahara, Christopher Ross

17 March - The envoy spearheading United Nations efforts to help resolve the dispute over the status of Western Sahara is scheduled to arrive in Rabat, Morocco, today on the first leg of a nine-day visit to the region.

The trip by Christopher Ross, the Secretary-General’s Personal Envoy for Western Sahara, follows the commitment reiterated by the parties to the dispute during their informal talks in Armonk, New York, on 10-11 February to continue their negotiations as soon as possible.

Mr. Ross will also visit Tindouf, the Mauritanian capital Nouakchott and Algiers, wrapping up his mission on 25 March. The mission is his third to the region since his appointment in

January 2009.

Discussions in Armonk represented the second round of informal talks held in accordance with Security Council Resolution 1871, which last year called on the parties to continue the dialogue under the auspices of the Secretary-General without preconditions to achieve “a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.”

Fighting broke out between Morocco and the Frente Polisario after the Spanish colonial administration of Western Sahara ended in 1976. Morocco has presented a plan for autonomy while the position of the Frente Polisario is that the territory’s final status should be decided in a referendum on self-determination that includes independence as an option.

A UN mission, known as MINURSO, has been entrusted with monitoring the ceasefire reached in September 1991 and organizing a referendum on self-determination.

UN Economic and Social Council to hold key meeting next month on assistance to Haiti



Economic and Social Council President for 2010, Ambassador Hamidon Ali (Malaysia)

17 March - The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) – the body responsible for coordinating economic and social work of the UN funds, programmes and specialized agencies – said today that it will host a meeting next month to consider what else the UN can do to help the Haitian Government rebuild its country.

“The Government of Haiti formulated the national plan for reconstruction, so we will see how ECOSOC and its bodies fit into the plan,” Hamidon Ali, ECOSOC President for 2010, told journalists in New York today during an overview of the UN body’s work for the year ahead.

“The Council is also an important forum where Member States and humanitarian organizations discuss the challenges, opportunities and activities related to emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations,” Mr. Ali added.

The ECOSOC meeting is expected to provide guidance and maintain the momentum of international assistance to Haiti, following the donors’ conference scheduled for 31 March at UN Headquarters in New York.

“ECOSOC has also been home to the ad hoc advisory group on Haiti for the past decade,” said Nikhil Seth, Director of the Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination, who stressed that the body was looking at the long-term development of Haiti, and not just recovery from the 12 January earthquake.

The UN body is also planning its Annual Ministerial Review, which will be held from 28 June through the end of July on the theme of gender equality and the empowerment of women.

“We hope to build around the excitement and momentum around the recently concluded Commission on Status of Women and celebration of the Beijing Plus 15,” Mr. Ali said, referring to the landmark conference on women held in 1995 in the Chinese capital.

The global review will include a series of national voluntary presentations from developing and developed countries on their progress in implementing internationally agreed development targets, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

This year, presentations are expected from Australia, Brazil, France, Guatemala, Moldova, Mongolia, Namibia, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the Republic of the Congo, the Republic of Korea and the United States.

The reports will contribute to the General Assembly MDG Summit planned to coincide with the beginning of the Assembly’s high-level debate in New York in September.

In terms of other goals, Mr. Ali stressed the importance of UN intergovernmental bodies speaking with one voice to promote an integrated approach to peace and development.

He also highlighted the need to engage with civil society, the private sector and academia to turn political commitment into actions and concrete results.

UNICEF providing books to 145,000 Central African children affected by conflict



17 March - The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is working to ensure that some 145,000 children affected by conflict in the Central African Republic have literature, mathematics and science books.

With funding from the Belgian Government, the agency has so far provided 60,000 mathematics books, 60,000 French books and 2,400 teachers' guides to the Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research.

The country has been beset by sporadic conflict in recent years between Government forces and rebels and a spill-over of violence from neighbouring countries that have left hundreds of thousands of people displaced.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the educational system in the country is characterized by a low level of access – 56 per cent for boys and 49 per cent for girls in 2008.

The dropout rates are particularly high, especially among girls, at 54 per cent.

The inadequate number of textbooks is detrimental to the quality of learning and the current ratio for the country is about 2 books for 9 students, OCHA noted.

The UNICEF project covers various prefectures within the areas affected by armed conflict.

UN agency uses local mills in Pakistan's Swat Valley to improve access to food



Returning families walk past closed shops, other buildings in Swat District in Pakistan's NWFP

17 March - The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) announced today that it has contracted eight mills in Pakistan's conflict-affected Swat Valley to produce fortified wheat flour in a bid to boost the local economy and make food more easily accessible to families in the area.

"The combination of conflict and high food prices since the humanitarian crisis started has been devastating to many people in the Swat Valley," said Wolfgang Herbinger, WFP's representative in Pakistan. "Milling flour locally will help support local business amid constant insecurity as well as increase availability of flour," he added.

The locally produced wheat flour is also expected to stabilize prices, which were already high globally before the start of the conflict and soared again when conflict escalated in the Swat Valley in the summer of 2009. More than 3 million people were displaced as a result of the conflict and many of them still require food aid because they have not been able to return to their villages.

WFP already mills wheat flour in Lahore, Islamabad, Peshawar and Rawalpindi and fortifies it with micronutrients. The newly-contracted mills in Swat Valley bring to 25 the number of local mills used by the agency. They will have the capacity to produce more than 2,000 metric tons of wheat flour daily. That capacity will be increased as the security situation improves.

UN trade arm brings experts together to discuss boosting infrastructure



17 March - Experts are meeting at a gathering of the United Nations agency promoting commerce to fight poverty to find ways to help developing countries improve so-called infrastructure service sectors (ISS), which serve key functions including banking, energy and transportation.

ISS, according to the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), is essential to supporting agriculture, manufacturing and service industries markets in poorer nations and “forms the backbone of national economies.”

Regulation to correct market failures and achieve universal access to essential services, while widely recognized as fundamental, has posed challenges for governments. Ever-changing economic, social, technological and environmental realities require countries to adapt regulations to new conditions, and they need sufficient institutional capacities to guide, negotiate, regulate and monitor ISS, UNCTAD said.

A recent survey carried out of nearly 90 regulatory agencies found that the challenges the face are similar, but that least developed countries (LDCs) face special constraints, being short of appropriate personnel, financial resources and equipment.

Some one dozen academics, government officials and representatives of international organizations are participating in the three-day meeting, which kicked off in Geneva today, to examine what kinds of regulatory and institutional frameworks are best suited for individual countries.

UNCTAD said in an information note that this event comes at a “critical moment, as the full impact of the economic and financial crisis on infrastructure services in developing countries is unfolding and recovery measures and regulatory overhauls are still being implemented.”

Secretary-General and General Assembly President call for rejection of extremism



Traditional dancers perform in Burundi.
[File Photo]

17 March - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today appealed for a rejection of extremism, underscoring that the international grouping of over 100 countries known as the Non-Aligned Movement, or NAM, has an invaluable role to play in promoting greater understanding.

“We need to counter those who polarize and distort, or who humiliate and manipulate for electoral aims,” Mr. Ban said in a video message to the Special Non-Aligned Movement Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue for Peace and Development in Manila, Philippines.

“We have had enough of mutual suspicion and fear,” he added.

To that end, NAM, with its “wonderfully diverse” membership of 118 nations, the Secretary-General said, can help to foster greater understanding, “which can be a foundation for a better future and a world of peaceful coexistence.”

He also appealed in his message for the organization’s support for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, launched in 2005 to help overcome prejudices between nations, cultures and religions.

“Peace, development and human rights all depend on mutual understanding and respect,” he emphasized.

Also attending the gathering, General Assembly President Ali Treki told participants that dialogue must be carried out at the



national, regional and international levels to ensure that people can practise their religions and beliefs, free from discrimination.

“We must not tolerate attacks on religions and beliefs or on their symbols, and must ensure that freedom of expression is not invoked in order to show contempt for religions,” he said.

The international community, Dr. Treki said, cannot be “hampered by an artificial clash that pits the followers of different religions against one another on the basis of their convictions.”

Developing nations are up against many challenges, including the global and economic crisis, climate change and natural disasters, and development is closely tied with tolerance and the wiping out of radicalism and extremism, he pointed out.

The Assembly President also informed the meeting that he will hold a high-level debate in New York in May on dialogue among civilizations to examine how such talks can resolve long-standing conflicts.

He arrived in Manila for a five-day visit from Seoul, where he held talks with top officials in the Republic of Korea (ROK), including President Lee Myung-bak, Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan and National Assembly Speaker Kim Hyung-O.