

Background Paper on Guinea-Bissau legislative elections on 16 November 2008

Introduction:

1. Following the request for electoral assistance made in a letter addressed by Prime Minister Cabi to the United Nations Secretary-General in early June 2007, the Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs, who is also the UN Coordinator for Electoral Assistance, dispatched a mission to Guinea-Bissau in September 2007. The mission involved consultations with the Government and international partners, and had as its main objective to assess the political context and identify the necessary conditions for the provision of assistance for the 2008 legislative elections. As a result of the mission, the Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs wrote to Prime Minister Cabi on 6 November 2007 to confirm the readiness of the UN to provide electoral assistance to Guinea-Bissau.
2. The following recommendations were made: (1) UNDP should formulate an electoral support project for the legislative elections, by updating the October 2006 operational plan to include a more detailed electoral budget and calendar reflecting existing legislation. UNDP should also develop national capacity for the planning of electoral operations, including logistical aspects; create a donor coordination mechanism to avoid gaps and overlaps, and support the National Electoral Commission (CNE) civic and voter education campaigns. (2) Within a peace and stability framework, UNOGBIS should have the overarching role of promoting an environment conducive to the holding of credible elections, including in the run-up to the elections, particularly in light of threats from drug trafficking and long-simmering political, military and social tensions. If requested, UNOGBIS should also coordinate international observers and give political backing to UNDP's resource-mobilization activities.
3. As a result of a subsequent technical mission from UNDP in November 2007 a project document for electoral assistance was finalized in February 2008. In April 2008, the President of Guinea-Bissau announced that legislative elections would be held on 16 November 2008. The following key issues and challenges have been identified in this context: voter registration, civic education and the payment of salary arrears.

Voter registration

4. In Guinea-Bissau the voters' roll is subject to annual updates which should be held during the months of January and February (up to March for Bissau-Guineans abroad). However, no updates have been conducted since April 2005, when a complete re-registration of the entire electorate was carried out. The exercise resulted in a total count of 533,053 voters. It is estimated that between thirty to thirty-three thousand citizens have turned 18 years in the interim period, and a similar number has changed residence.

5. The Registration Law (1998) attributes to the CNE the supervision and oversight of voter registration updates, while assigning to the Government the tasks of organizing and conducting those updates. The Government has carried out these tasks through the Ministry of Interior by establishing registration commissions throughout the territory, via its local administration. Following the review period and the handling and treatment of complaints and inconsistencies, the CNE prepares a final voters' list, which needs to be finalized at least 30 days prior to the election date. The arrival of the rainy season, and the request made by the Government to conduct a biometric registration of voters rather than a manual registration will further slow down the completion of this process.

Civic education campaign

6. A voters' civic education and awareness campaign needs to be organized and conducted in the lead-up to elections. Through this process, awareness is raised among the population on the importance of voter participation. A sensitization campaign can provide an opportunity for national dialogue on the country's challenges and possible alternatives to overcoming them.

Salary arrears

7. The Government sovereignty costs amounts to US\$ 4,320,000, which includes salary arrears from previous elections, salaries for the upcoming election and the census of the Diaspora, as well as administration and management costs. During his meeting with the PBC delegation that visited Guinea-Bissau in April, the Prime Minister warned that the government of Guinea-Bissau would not be able to cover those costs in full without external financial assistance.
8. The Prime Minister also called attention to the fact that the government still owed salary arrears to the staff of the electoral commission for previous elections. He stressed that paying those arrears would contribute greatly to reducing social and political tensions and foster national reconciliation. In these circumstances, international support was essential and he hoped that engagement with the PBC would help in that effort.

International support (financial and technical assistance):

9. Financial and technical assistance remains the key challenge in preparation for the 16 November elections. Bilateral and multilateral international support is critical for the successful holding of these elections. Support to past elections included financial support, technical training and workshops for electoral staff, provision of electoral material and other logistics, and capacity-building for national media on electoral reporting.

Thematic discussions on the legislative elections - New York, 7 May, 2008

10. While the Government of Guinea-Bissau and its international partners acknowledge the continued need for strengthening democratic governance and participation through the provision of assistance, the pace of preparations and the resource-mobilization drive have remained slow and urgently need enhanced commitment and concrete proposals from all stakeholders.
11. The total electoral budget amounts to US\$ 8,557,522. The Government sovereignty costs of US\$ 4,320,000, to cover payment of electoral staff, payment of arrears and registration of voters in the Diaspora are not included in the project overall budget.
12. On the side of international partners, the EU has contributed € 600,000 through UNDP, and a further € 200,000 for its own preparations for and monitoring of the electoral process. While it is expected that partners will come forward with additional support, there is serious concern about the very slow pace of electoral assistance, as echoed by Prime Minister Cabi on 31 March 2008 in an official ceremony to present the Government's electoral budget to the international donor community. He expressed concern that despite pledges of electoral support from the international community, so far only the EU had made good on its promise. Prime Minister Cabi also announced that the Government would resort to pursuing bilateral initiatives with donors to ensure that assistance was available on time.
13. There is an urgent need to quickly establish a functioning coordination mechanism to ensure an integrated resource-mobilization drive for electoral assistance. Failure to do so may lead donors to opt for bilateral financial or technical assistance mechanisms, which could lead to overlap and duplication.
14. The Government has recently submitted a short-term quick-impact concept note for financial support to the elections from the Peacebuilding Fund. This project would focus on urgent assistance for biometric voter registration and civic education. While the concept note has been approved in New York in the amount of US\$ 1.4 million, the approval has been conditioned upon the non-availability of support from other bilateral and multilateral sources. The amount from the PBF should be used for voter registration and civic education.