

Ambassadorial-Level Meeting of the Peacebuilding Commission Liberia Configuration

14 November 2022

Chair's Summary

1. On 14 November 2022, H.E. Ms. Anna Karin Eneström, Permanent Representative of Sweden to the United Nations and Chair of the Liberia Configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), convened an Ambassadorial-level meeting focused on preparations for Liberia's upcoming legislative and presidential elections in October 2023.
2. In her opening remarks, the Chair underlined that the upcoming elections represented an important opportunity to consolidate the peace and democracy Liberia had enjoyed for twenty years. She noted that ensuring that the elections were transparent and inclusive, free and fair was of utmost priority and had, indeed, been a focus of her recent June trip to Liberia. During her visit to Liberia 5-10 June 2022, she said, she had met with key stakeholders including President George Weah and ministers of his government, representatives of the National Elections Commission (NEC), civil society and international partners to discuss preparations underway for the elections and to identify electoral related risks, as well as opportunities for the international community to support. She commended the government and national authorities for their commitment to ensuring peaceful, transparent, inclusive, free and fair elections. She also expressed concern regarding reports of militancy and the possible misuse of youth for partisan politics, as this had the potential to escalate to electoral violence. She underlined the need for a transparent system for voter registration. She also stressed the importance of ensuring women's political participation in the elections, as voters, candidates, electoral administrators or party supporters. She concluded by saying that she hoped the meeting would identify challenges and opportunities for the Commission to support the efforts of the national authorities.
3. H.E. Mr. Dee-Maxwell Saah Kemayah, Sr., Minister of Foreign Affairs of Liberia, indicated that the upcoming general and Presidential elections would be crucial to consolidating democracy in Liberia. He reaffirmed the commitment of the Government to ensure the conduct of a free, fair, transparent, peaceful, inclusive and credible elections in October 2023 that would meet international standards. In terms of resource mobilization for the elections, he indicated that the Government had actualized USD\$18 million for the NEC through appropriation in the 2022 National Budget and that Finance and Development Planning Minister Tweah had recently informed him that USD\$33 million was being earmarked for the NEC in the 2023 budget. Accordingly, he said, of the total budget for the elections of USD \$61million, the Government's support would amount to USD \$51 million leaving a gap remaining of USD \$10 million for the conduct of the elections. He asked that the Peacebuilding Commission, its membership, and international partners help mobilize the USD\$10 million gap and to provide

technical and logistical support and assistance to the NEC. Regarding the furtherance of the participation of women in the elections, he noted that provisions for a 30 per cent quota for senior party leadership and candidate listings had been included in the revised New Elections Bill and that the bill had been passed by the House and the Senate. Regarding the strengthening of democratic institutions, including the Judiciary and the media, he noted that the Government had taken actions, including passing legislation that sought to eradicate impediments to free speech. Regarding youth, he indicated that within the framework of the Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development (PAPD), the Government had initiated programs to support youth. He also indicated that the national census was now underway. He expressed appreciation for the electoral related PBF funded projects which further aimed to strengthen prevention against electoral violence and to support women's participation.

4. H.E Mr. Varney Sirleaf, Minister of Internal Affairs, expressed deep concern regarding the polarization in politics in the lead up to the elections and the fragile situation in the sub-region. Despite this, he said, the Government was on a steady trajectory and had maintained a good record regarding its human rights, freedom of expression and lack of political prisoners. He noted that efforts were being made towards increasing women's political participation in leadership and targeting violence against women in elections. He added that intimidation of women by traditional culture and attempts to deny them access to political participation were being addressed by the administrative policy regulations of his Ministry. He indicated that work was being done to address some of the electoral related logistical issues and noted that the NEC, working in tandem with the National Identity Registry, was working on the voter registration process which would begin in December, along with instituting biometric voter registration (BVR). With PBF support, through the Liberia Election Support Project, they had developed Standard Operating Procedures to guide and improve the relationship between security forces and the media. A national Situation Room for the elections, utilizing an early warning response mechanism, had been launched with the aim of preventing electoral related violence, he said. He also noted that over 1,000 youth volunteers including members of peace committees and early warning monitors, had been recruited and trained through the Election Project and deployed across the country to report on potential electoral related violence. He indicated that the current code of conduct of political parties would be reviewed and would be robustly monitored. He concluded by saying that the Government was committed to women's political leadership and participation in the upcoming elections and expressed gratitude to the PBF for supporting a project dedicated to addressing violence against women in elections and a project on the fostering of a peaceful electoral environment.
5. The Co-Chair of the NEC, H.E. Ms. P. Teplah Reeves, updated the Commission on electoral preparations. She noted that in May 2021 a decision had been taken to use biometric technology for the registration of voters in the 2023 elections. The procurement process for the BVR equipment and software was ongoing and the NEC was also engaged in the procurement

process for various goods, works and service in preparation of the voter registration exercise. She indicated that the NEC had also compiled and reviewed the legal framework for the voter registration and elections, including regulations and guidelines, and the Board of Commissioners was reviewing the final draft for approval. In addition to taking steps to decentralize its civic and voter education program, the NEC was involved in field verification of the electoral boundaries to pave the way for the finalization of voter registration centers. Regarding the electoral budget, the Government had now appropriated and approved the amount of \$20 million, in the National Budget for the fiscal year 2022, to kick start the voter registration exercise. Thus far, she said, the NEC had received half of the \$20 million allocated. Regarding steps taken and plan to maintain peace during the electoral process, she noted that the NEC had signed an MoU with the Government's Liberia Peacebuilding Office to cooperate and coordinate their efforts in maintaining peace. Other efforts in this regard included, plans to strengthen stakeholder engagement through the Inter-party Consultative Committee mechanism and direct community engagement across the country; the development of a civic voter education program; the development of the Protocol on Violence Against Women in Elections and Politics (VAWiE/P) which was signed by the leader of political parties; steps to improve the electoral disputes adjudication mechanism; and plans to have a robust monitoring and reporting mechanism to track potential hot spots and proactively take remedial actions. As to the challenges the NEC faced, the primary challenge had been the limited access to funds. Without the Government's approval of the election budget and a commitment to payment schedules, the NEC could not proceed with the procurement of election materials, she said. She concluded by outlining areas of continued participation and support from the PBC and other partners, including the need for increased technical cooperation, in particular from member states with experience in biometric voter registration. She added that support for the NEC to ensure accurate and consistent public outreach would be important to minimize misinformation. Another area of needed cooperation, she said, was the training of voter registration staff and poll workers.

6. Mr. Niels Scott, UN Resident Coordinator, indicated that although the international community had provided support for the elections through Liberia Electoral Support Project- elections dispute training, early warning technical assistance, media and civil society strengthening among others-Liberia was in the lead. The electoral process was for the most part proceeding peacefully, but incendiary commentary in the media and intemperate language by some political stakeholders were possible triggers of violence and an area of concern, he said. He underlined that civil society continued to play a vital role in monitoring, sensitization, and early warning. In collaboration with ECOWAS, the UN convened a second inter-party dialogue on 12 October to enhance the level of trust and communication amongst political parties and stakeholders. He stated that the NEC was facing funding constraints and logistical challenges in organizing the 2023 elections. The transition from the Optical Mark Recognition system to a complex BVR Technology was one of the most significant issues, he

said. He noted that the NEC had been working tirelessly to pull off an incredible feat under challenging conditions, especially in the context of severe underfunding. He underlined the need for timely, predictable disbursements of funding to ensure credible elections. He also called on the Board of Commissioners to continue to reaffirm and demonstrate their independence and impartiality to strengthen public confidence in the NEC and the electoral process. He expressed concern as to whether the census would be available in time for the NEC to delimit constituencies, as mandated by Liberia's Constitution. November, he said, marked the start of the much-delayed 2022 National Population and Housing Census, led by the Government of Liberia and he acknowledged the contributions of UNFPA, the World Bank, USAID, Sweden, Ireland and Ghana, in this regard. He called for robust public communication and consultation by Government institutions, as part of a broader crisis-management strategy to pre-empt disinformation and defuse tensions. Regarding the underrepresentation of women in politics and public life at the national, county and local levels, he indicated that, as seen at the last PBC meeting on gender equality and women's empowerment, barriers to equal representation in Liberia persist. He added that violence against women in elections (VAWIE) was a reason women were discouraged from participating in politics. He welcomed the amendment to the New Elections Law and noted that other provisions were undergoing further review before the bill would be signed by the President but cautioned that "we must remain vigilant" so that such progress was not reversed. He indicated that a stronger peaceful Liberia was a major contributor to sub-regional peace and security and despite instability in some neighboring countries which carried potential risks, there were also opportunities to consolidate peace and security in partnership with the MRU. He thanked the PBF for its support to peace consolidation and highlighted the recent USD \$2 million dollar project to promote greater political participation of women and VAWiE prevention response as well the USD \$3 million project which aimed to contribute to a more peaceful electoral environment.

7. Like prior speakers, Mr. Eddie Jarwolo, Executive Director of Naymote, underlined that the 2023 elections presented an opportunity for Liberia to consolidate democracy and strengthen the foundations for peace. The elections, he said, were expected to test the credibility and strength of national institutions, particularly those tasked with various aspects of the election, from election administration to security and dispute resolution. He indicated that the credibility of the elections had been challenged by the two leading political parties, the Unity Party and the Liberty Party, and this needed to be addressed. Further, he said, a lack of trust in institutions was likely to translate into a lack of trust in the entire electoral process; opposition youth, for example, perceived the police as partisan. Inadequate financial and human resources to expand operations of the police to all counties, particularly those considered to be conflict-prone was an issue. The ownership of radio stations by politicians was also a cause of concern, he said. He cited the following challenges, including: 1) Uncertainties and access to public information surrounding the tendering for the BVR

system; 2) the lack of clarity as to whether the long- delayed census would be conducted ahead of voter registration and whether the electoral constituencies will be reapportioned in time; 3) the use of youth as instruments of violence (or militants) by political leaders against their opponents; 4) the electoral legal framework, in particular the amended code of conduct and electoral law still to be signed by the President less than a year before the elections; 5) limited political will in dealing corruption and related issues. In conclusion, his recommendations included the following: 1) BVR must be procured soonest; 2) the Joint Security Task Force should be supported with resources and training to develop a feasible electoral security framework; 3) NEC should engage LISGIS to develop a framework on who census data will be used for the reapportioning of constituencies; 4) International development partners should regularly meet with political parties, the NEC and CSOs on formulating scenarios that have the potential to undermine the electoral process and how they can be mitigated; 5) provide political leadership and campaign management training for young people; 6) support political parties to train and deploy their agents during crucial stages of the electoral process such as voter registration, voting, counting and tallying; 7) increase protection for civil society activists.

Following the briefings, member states spoke and made the following observations:

- The Commission commended Liberia on the remarkable progress the country had made in the last two decades and indicated that the 2023 elections represent a crucial milestone in Liberia’s consolidation of democracy, peace, reconciliation, and national development. Speakers underscored the importance of ensuring peaceful, free, fair, transparent, credible, and inclusive elections and noted that inclusive dialogue between and among political parties, and adherence to a joint Code of Conduct and declaration of non-violence, would be key to ensuring peaceful elections.
 - They also underlined the importance of promoting women’s political participation and welcomed the Government’s efforts to address the underrepresentation of women in politics, including through the proposed 30 per cent gender quota. They underscored the need to fully implement the NEC Protocol and Action Plan to address violence against women in elections and politics and expressed the hope that additional measures will be taken to mitigate violence against women in the lead up to the elections.
8. In her concluding remarks, Ms. Elizabeth Spehar, Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support, indicated that when she had visited Liberia in June accompanying the Chair, she had been very encouraged by the Government’s clear commitment to the holding of free, fair, inclusive and credible elections in 2023. She noted that they had also met with representatives of the NEC and witnessed their dedication, despite the formidable challenges they faced as well as the strength of civil society. She noted that they had also met with

women and women's groups, including at the grass roots level, and had been impressed by their dynamism and engagement. She indicated hopes that the 30 per cent quota on senior political party leadership and candidate listing in elections would be signed into law in time for it to be implemented for the 2023 elections, and that the NEC Protocol and Action Plan to address violence against women in elections and politics would be fully implemented in the lead up to the elections. She stressed that the PBF remained committed to support the process for what would be a milestone election. In terms of the challenges, she underscored the importance of making sure that communication and dialogue on the electoral process remained front and centre so that the NEC, the Government and the political parties all committed to keep the public informed and to create a peaceful environment thereby encouraging full participation in the electoral process. She added that any problems or issues in the lead up to the elections or afterwards should be dealt with via constructive dialogue and through the relevant judicial mechanisms. She underlined the importance of all Liberians having trust in the electoral process and all stakeholders, in particular the NEC and the political parties and the Government had, she said, an important role to play in engendering trust in the elections and the electoral process. The role of civil society was also essential, including their role as observers of the electoral process as it unfolds. She underlined the importance of continued international support both in terms of resources and political accompaniment, technical advice and coordination. In this respect, she said, the Liberia Configuration and the support of member states would continue to be critical to fully support the electoral process.

9. Ms. Cecilia McGill, Chargé d'Affaires, Mission of Liberia to the United Nations, expressed gratitude for the sustained support that the international community had provided, including following UNMIL's departure. The Commission had, she said, supported Liberia's priorities, including social cohesion, reconciliation and inclusivity as well as a strong focus on gender equality, mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. She underlined Liberia's commitment to peaceful and inclusive elections and said that Liberia remained an important example of sustaining peace which offered useful lessons on global partnership on peacebuilding and sustainable financing. She expressed optimism that political process would carry the country forward into a stronger and more democratic future as Liberia headed into peaceful elections.
10. The Chair thanked the briefers. She concluded by underscoring the importance of the 2023 elections which, she said, presented a milestone for Liberia. She indicated that dialogue between and among political parties and adherence to a joint Code of Conduct and declaration of non-violence were key to ensure a peaceful election. Ensuring women's participation in the electoral process at all levels was, she said, equally important. She concluded by saying the Commission would continue to follow developments in Liberia as it prepared for its 2023 elections, including issues that had come up the discussion that day.