

Ambassadorial-Level Meeting of the Peacebuilding Commission Liberia Configuration

19 May 2022

Chair's Summary

1. On 19 May 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 gender equality and women's empowerment, including eliminating gender-based violence and promoting women's political participation in the context of the upcoming Presidential and Legislative elections in 2023.
2. In her opening remarks, the Chair underlined that women's full, equal and meaningful participation is a prerequisite for sustainable peace and democracy and that advancing gender equality and women's empowerment remained a priority for the Liberian Government and for the PBC Configuration. She highlighted the chronic underrepresentation of women in politics in Liberia and indicated that the Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development for 2018-2023 (PAPD) set a target to increase political participation of women at the national and local levels with a view to reaching 30% by 2023. As the National Elections Commission (NEC) prepared for the upcoming Legislative and Presidential elections, the 30% gender quota, as per section 4.5 of the new elections law and proposed amendment took on added importance, she said. She also drew the Configuration's attention to the persistent problem of violence against women, including in relation to elections. She noted that the Government of Liberia had taken a strong stance against sexual and gender-based violence, including through the National Roadmap on Anti Rape and SGVB produced by an Inter-Ministerial Taskforce. The Chair also informed the Configuration about her upcoming visit to Liberia from 4-9 June and to Côte d'Ivoire on 10 June. She indicated that she would be joined by Assistant Secretary General Elizabeth Spehar, to discuss national peacebuilding priorities with the Government and other key stakeholders including local authorities, civil society and the diplomatic community in Liberia, with a particular focus on the Configuration's priority themes for 2022. As part of the Configuration's ongoing efforts to strengthen synergies and partnership between the UN and IFI's in peacebuilding, the Chair would also visit the Headquarters of the African Development Bank in Abidjan on 10 June to discuss the Bank's support to peacebuilding in Liberia. The Chair invited Members of the Configuration to provide input to the visit in their interventions.
3. H.E. Mr. Dee-Maxwell Saah Kemayah, Sr., Minister of Foreign Affairs of Liberia, noted that the Configuration meeting was being convened in the context of its priority themes for 2022, including social cohesion and national reconciliation efforts, promotion of women's empowerment and gender equality and support for the preparation and organization of peaceful transparent and inclusive presidential elections in 2023. All of these elements, he said, were fundamental to the attainment of the goals of the Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and

Development for 2018-2023 (PAPD). He highlighted that notable progress continued to be made in the area of gender equality and women's empowerment and in reducing SGVB, including through the adoption of the Revised National Gender Policy (2018-2022); the second National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security (2019-2023); the Local Governance and Land Rights Act (with gender responsive considerations); and the passage of the Domestic Violence Act and Anti-SGVB Roadmap for 2020-2022. He also underscored the Government's determination to pursue the full, meaningful and equal participation of women in leadership and decision making at national and local levels. With regard to the upcoming Presidential and Legislative elections in 2023, he noted that the NEC had submitted a budget of approximately 92 million USD for the successful conduct of the 2023 elections. To this end, he said, the Government as an initial step had allocated 25,000,000 USD in the 2022 national budget, for preparatory activities for the 2023 Presidential and Legislative elections. He indicated that he also wished to encourage further consultations to garner additional support for the upcoming Presidential and Legislative elections. He further indicated that the Government was grateful to multilateral and bilateral partners, in particular the IFIs, including the IMF, the WB and the AfDB, the UNCT as well as for the contributions of the PBF. The Minister welcomed the opportunity the upcoming Chair's visit afforded to engage in further discussions on the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment in Liberia, as well as other national peacebuilding priorities.

4. H.E. MS. Williametta E. Saydee-Tarr, Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection, indicated that advancing gender equality remained a key priority of the Government. Despite limited funding, she said, several policies were being implemented, but not at full capacity. These included the Revised National Gender policy; the second National Plan on Women, Peace and Security; the Land Rights Act; the Comprehensive SGVB Prevention Strategy; and the passage into law of the Domestic Violence Act. With funding from the UN's "Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund," Liberia would work actively with women to increase their political participation as well as to support female candidates, she said. She noted that the second phase of the country's National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security was gradually being implemented but that additional funding was needed. Regarding the implementation of the Anti SGVB Roadmap, significant funding had been allocated, she said, and a SGVB TaskForce had been set up inclusive of the Ministries of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Justice and Health as well as other key actors supporting the process. The TaskForce had been equipped with logistical support including a sedan, pickups, several motorbikes and operational support. She indicated that response to SGVB cases, particularly rape, had begun to be implemented in an adequate, timely and more coordinated manner. With regard to women's political participation, she expressed concern that women continued to be discouraged from political participation primarily due to religious restrictions, traditional norms and the lack of requisite education. Although women made up more than half the population, she said, they lacked access to information, jobs, justice and technology which impeded their

ability to participate in politics. In addition, she said, women could easily become victims of election related violence. She informed the Configuration that in an effort to address women's participation in politics, a "Mock Parliament Session" was held a year or so ago and aspiring young women and female political leaders, including Representatives and Senators, took part with a view to examining the dynamics and challenges affecting women's participation in politics. With regard to the 2023 elections, she underlined that it would be important to advocate with the various political parties to commit to the 30% quota as they determine their candidates for the Presidential and Legislative elections. She also stressed the importance of engaging communities with peace messages and creating an enabling environment for women to engage in politics, in particular in rural areas. In this regard, she said, modalities were being worked on with the World Bank to invest in the Liberia Women Empowerment Project (LWEP) with the objective of advancing women's and girl's empowerment in targeted communities. She noted that significant funding gaps were hindering the full implementation and scale up of ongoing programs. The Anti-SGVB Roadmap had a funding gap of 4 million USD after the Government's allocation of about half a million USD to this project, she said. Recognizing that existing funding gaps required additional support, the Minister requested the Commission's support in advocating for resource mobilization.

5. Mr. Niels Scott, United Nations Resident Coordinator in Liberia indicated that there was widespread agreement that women continue to be underrepresented in politics. With women occupying merely 8 of the House of Representatives 73 seats and 2 of 30 Senators' seats, it was clear, he said, that female candidates faced more obstacles than their male counterparts. The introduction of the 30% quota on candidate listings could encourage more women to run, he said. He noted that after years of advocacy, the House of Representatives passed the Electoral Reform Bill and it was his understanding that the Senate Committees on Autonomous Agencies, Elections and Judiciary were expected to submit the Bill to the Senate plenary deliberations on 19 May. He noted that the House had voted to amend Section 4.5 of the 1986 election law which sets aside an exclusive 30% for women representation in every political party. Section e.5 (1d) of the Elections Law Amendment Act also calls for a political party or coalition to have at least one female contestant for every primary at a convention for each constituency. The punishment for defaulting political parties, he explained, was that their candidate listing would be rejected by the Election Commission and the affected party might be entitled to re-submit within the required period. This was, he said, a huge step on the way to achieving gender parity. However, the quota would not insulate women against prejudice, discrimination and acts of physical or psychological violence, he noted. Regarding SGVB, he said it was estimated that 38.2% of girls and women aged 15-49 had undergone female genital mutilation (FMG). With the assistance of the EU-UN Spotlight initiative, he noted, alternative economic livelihood activities were being provided for traditional practitioners of FMG. In February 2022, Chief Zazan, head of the National Traditional Council of Chiefs and Elders in Liberia announced a three-year ban on FMG. However, effective monitoring and holding violators accountable

remained a challenge, he said. He concluded by calling on the Configuration to continue to bring a strategic approach and coherence to gender equality and women's empowerment in Liberia and to remain seized of the electoral process, and its potential to trigger and escalate conflict, if not managed properly. In follow-up to questions regarding DNA equipment to effectively prosecute rape cases, the Resident Coordinator informed the Configuration that there were four DNA machines in Liberia which were currently not operational as they required appropriate premises in which to be placed, parts and reagents as well as training to operate them. The Resident Coordinator indicated that he expected to be able to announce the first testing rolling out soon- in weeks not months.

6. Counsellor Dr. Yvette Chesson-Wureh, Angie Brooks International Centre, emphasized the critical role of civil society in promoting civic engagement and local ownership in Liberia, which would be key in the lead-up to the 2023 Presidential and Legislative Elections. She noted that the Angie Brooks International Centre (ABIC) for Women's Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security was currently implementing a PBF funded project entitled 'Sustainable and inclusive peace in Liberia through promoting women leadership and participation in civic and political life and their strengthened role in conflict resolution'. The ABIC component of the project was based, she said, on the Women's Situation Room (WSR) mechanism, a non-political process that mobilizes, trains and empowers women and youth to take ownership of peace processes in their communities before, during and after elections. The mechanism, she added used both track I and track II diplomacy to ensure ordinary women were able to de-escalate tensions through mediation. The WSR works, she explained, engaged smaller units, from the grassroots level up to the national level, lobbying relevant stakeholders to commit to peace through the use of dialogue and legal channels to address their grievances. She underlined the need to promote women's political participation and noted with concern that the backlash risked deterring future generations from entering politics. In this regard, she stressed the urgency in adopting the proposed 30 % gender quota. She further underlined the importance of providing education for women in the rural communities on their rights to political participation. She also recommended that stakeholders like the NEC and political parties should reduce filing fees for women aspirants at the primaries and also for the main elections. This often was the first deterrent for women who desire to take part in elections, she said.
7. Member States and other partners welcomed the briefings and made the following observations:
 - They commended the Government's commitment to strengthening gender equality and women's empowerment, which was recognized as essential for building and sustaining peace in Liberia. They underscored that political ownership, will and funding would continue to be central for making progress in this area.
 - In light of the 2023 Presidential and Legislative Elections, they 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 % gender quota. They also underscored the need to support the full implementation of the Anti-SGBV Roadmap.

- They expressed concerns at the persistent challenge of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls in Liberia, including in relation to elections, female genital mutilation and the widespread problem of rape and encouraged the Government of Liberia in further advancing its efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls including through the continued implementation of the Anti SGVB Roadmap 2020-2022.
- They welcomed the planned Chair's visit to Liberia and expressed support to the priority focus of discussions on gender equality and women's empowerment, particularly in the context of the elections of 2023.

8. Ms. Cecilia McGill, Chargé d'Affaires, Mission of Liberia to the United Nations, noted that, as captured under Goal 5 of SDGs, gender equality was not just a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. She indicated that leading factors contributing to gender equality included cultural and social stereotypes, lack of finance, the level of social and economic development that exists for women in Liberia, including lack of access to education and job opportunities. These factors, she said, were among the leading factors impeding gender equality and excluding women from politics and governance. For the Government of Liberia, advancing gender equality and women's empowerment remained a priority and with support from the UN system and donor partners progress had been made in addressing these factors through the enactment/amendment of legislation, policy development, and protocol actions to curb violence against women and promote women's political participation. She thanked the Configuration for its support, in particular as pertained to the Legislative and Presidential elections which would, she said, strengthen the rule of law and sustaining peace. Regarding women's political participation, she thanked the PBC for supporting capacity building programs to ensure women are equipped with the necessary skills during campaigns and while in office was, she said, critical.
9. The Chair thanked the briefers and commended the ongoing efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in Liberia. It was important, she said, that this work continued and the measures put in place, implemented. She concluded by underscoring the importance of continuing to promote broad civil society participation in these efforts.