

Peacebuilding Commission Working Group on Lessons Learned
Meeting on Sierra Leone
February 20, 2007

Summary Note of the Chair

1. In order to enrich the discussions of the Peacebuilding Commission's country-specific meetings on Sierra Leone, the Working Group on Lessons Learned convened its first informal discussion on lessons relevant to risk reduction and confidence-building in the context of post-conflict elections. The meeting was chaired by the Ambassador of El Salvador H.E. Carmen Maria Gallardo Hernandez and included expert panelists from the UN in Sierra Leone, Member States and civil society. (See attached programme).
2. Sierra Leone's second post-conflict Presidential and Parliamentary Elections are scheduled for 28 July 2007. The meeting explored general risks posed by elections in post-conflict contexts and in Sierra Leone in particular as well as strategies to address such risks. Panelists noted the importance of identifying and addressing risks to Sierra Leone's democratic transition and supporting the Government's efforts in this regard. The experiences from countries that have conducted several rounds of post-conflict elections (Mozambique, El Salvador, Croatia, and Nicaragua) and the lessons extracted from those elections were also discussed.
3. The Ambassador of Sierra Leone to the UN and representatives from the UN in Sierra Leone stressed that preparation for the July elections are on schedule and proceeding without major difficulties. The National Elections Commission (NEC), although a new body is viewed as independent and credible by all parties, and has enjoyed support from the international community. The panellists highlighted a number of positive political developments in Sierra Leone such as the openness of the political space, media freedom, and freedoms of speech and association. However, they also noted that one of the biggest challenges in the context of the upcoming elections is that these political developments have not been matched by progress in the economic and social spheres. In the words of one of the speakers: "the openness of the political space has not delivered economic benefits for the people." Participants also noted that whereas the 2002 Sierra Leone elections were largely about "voting for peace" the 2007 elections are a referendum on the government's capacity to deliver peace dividends.
4. Other challenges mentioned were possible disputes over election results, perceptions of possible abuse of incumbency power, the perceptions of undue influence by Paramount Chiefs, and possible youth mobilization for violence. While it was recognized that each country situation is unique and there is no "one-size fits all" formula that could take care of all these risks, panellists suggested a number of confidence-building and risk reduction measures for addressing these challenges drawing on lessons-learned from other countries as well as from Sierra Leone's own past elections. Such measures could include:

- Regular dialogue and public debates among all party leaders and members
- Adoption of a Code of Conduct for Political Parties (this should be regularly updated and include accountability and enforcement measures)
- Strengthening of electoral institutions (NEC, PPRC)
- Capacity-building for civil society institutions to engage in civic and voter education, elections monitoring and observation
- Support to media organizations and the development and enforcement of a media code of conduct
- Constructive engagement of the Sierra Leone diaspora community especially in the area of campaign financing
- Public statements by political leaders in support of national unity

5. It was also noted that regional dynamics (including the current situation in Guinea) and their impact on the electoral preparations would need to be closely monitored. A number of speakers stressed the importance of creating and strengthening electoral dispute mechanisms and promoting legislative reforms noting in particular that “preparations should not be limited to the day of the elections but should also anticipate possible post-election challenges.”

6. There are a number of initiatives already being undertaken in this regard by the government of Sierra Leone with support from the UN and other partners. Sierra Leone recently adopted a Code of Conduct for Political Parties and a Media Code of Conduct which are now being widely disseminated. Under the auspices of the Political Party Registration Commission (PPRC) a mechanisms has been set up for an inclusive all-party dialogue, the first such mechanism in Sierra Leone. Political parties engaged in regular dialogue through the PPRC are discussing issues such as security provisions for the elections and women’s equal participation as candidates, voters and observers. Given lessons learned from the 2002 elections in Sierra Leone particular attention is being paid to security concerns and the role of the media especially community radio stations. A National Security Council Coordination mechanism has been set up to ensure adequate security for the election.

7. These efforts need the full support of the international community. Additional capacity-building and resources are needed to strengthen the NEC and other electoral institutions. The meeting ended with the PBC members reiterating their support for the peace consolidation process in Sierra Leone and their commitment to closely follow the preparations for the July elections.

8. In closing the meeting, the Chair thanked all participants for having contributed to a rich discussion. The Chair agreed to send a summary note of the discussion and recommendations to PBC members, especially the country-specific configuration on Sierra Leone chaired by the Permanent Representative of the Netherlands.