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As Electoral Campaign Starts, Congolese and International NGOs Call for Urgent Measures to Prevent Escalating Violence

The national election campaign officially starts today in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), exactly one month ahead of historic presidential and legislative elections, scheduled for November 28 2011. 41 humanitarian and human rights organizations have expressed concern about the high political tension and deteriorating security situation. They have called upon all Congolese and international actors involved to take urgent measures to prevent electoral violence, better protect civilians and ensure credible, free and fair elections.

<http://www.fidh.org/As-Electoral-Campaign-Starts>



FIDH - Worldwide Human Rights Movement

"This election in Congo is the ultimate test. Is Congo on course to consolidate its fledging democracy or return to a state of widespread instability, insecurity and violence? Second elections are vital to consolidate democratic peace gains in the country, complete a full electoral cycle and strengthen democratic institutions", said Thierry Vircoulon, Central Africa Director at the International Crisis Group (ICG).

The government presides over a country in which the average adult has 3.8 years of education, approximately 20% of children die before age five and millions of civilians have died in the last decades as a result of war. A new government will need a strong, legitimate mandate from the Congolese people to effectively address these systemic problems.

"The international community provides billions of dollars in assistance to DRC. It cannot afford for fraudulent or poorly conducted elections to spark violence and set back development. We have significantly less electoral observers than in 2006. The international community must be strict in monitoring compliance with international standards, and strongly condemn any irregularities. After so many decades of war and plunder, the Congolese people deserve peace and stability - and really need support for that", said Paul Nsapu, General Secretary of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), and chair of the Ligue des Electeurs in the DRC.

Recent events in the DRC have indicated the alarming potential for violence and destabilization over the electoral period. Since early September violent clashes between the police and opposition demonstrators have occurred, with several people killed and numerous demonstrators injured in Kinshasa. In addition to this election-related violence, the country has been ravaged by widespread insecurity for years, with a recent increase of attacks targeting humanitarian workers, including the deadliest incident in Congolese history, in which five aid workers were killed in October in South Kivu. Security forces in the DRC are already struggling with ongoing insecurity and are unable to respond to any further escalation.

"Congolese authorities say there is peace and safety in the DRC, but with elections just one month away, political tensions have risen with clashes between political parties and supporters occurring regularly. The decision by the DRC government to forbid political and public demonstrations reveals the government's inability to prevent and respond to electoral violence, and goes against the Congolese constitution. We need reliable security forces to protect us during the electoral period, especially in Kinshasa where tensions are already very high", declared Jerome Bonso, Coordinator of the Congolese coalition Agir pour des Elections Transparentes et Apaisées (AETA).

The DRC government has the primary responsibility of protecting civilians and organizing peaceful elections. Yet, there are serious doubts about whether credible, transparent and democratic polls are possible within the official electoral calendar. Without elections that meet free and fair standards, as well as a strong international and local observation presence to build confidence in the electoral process, the risk of electoral dispute and violence is high. Hot spots include Kinshasa, where some of our organizations have denounced excessive use of force against protesters by the national police. The potential for violence is also high in Eastern Congo, which voted heavily for President Kabila in the last election.

Our organizations call for the following measures to be urgently taken to prevent electoral violence:

- The DRC authorities should ensure that civilians are able to participate safely in the elections by deploying well-trained and equipped national police forces and by ensuring that the police refrain from using excessive force. The authorities should respect freedom of expression and the press, guarantee the right of assembly and peaceful protest, and abstain from intimidation. They should ensure that effective electoral dispute mechanisms are in place.

- The National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) should immediately publish more information about its strategy, including its plans for collating and publishing the results and voter education. It should facilitate a constructive dialogue about the electoral process between civil society, the opposition and the authorities in power, in line with the consultation process that took place in 2006.
- The political parties should abide by the Electoral Code of Conduct, accept the result of free and fair elections, and ask their supporters to remain peaceful. They should avoid engaging in hate speeches or inciting the population to violence.
- Embassies and international electoral observation missions should coordinate their actions with local observers in order to monitor as much of the country as possible. They should focus observation on likely flashpoints - such as large urban areas Kinshasa, Lubumbashi and Mbandaka - invest more in building local observation capacity, and publicly denounce any violations in the electoral process.
- The UN mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) should ensure that its rapid reaction force and UN police are ready to deploy in identified flashpoints in order to prevent and respond to any possible violence, including responding to any deliberate use of excessive force against civilians by the Congolese authorities. It should also publicly report on election-related violations, and mediate conflicts between political parties.

SIGNATORY ORGANIZATIONS

International organizations

- Africa Europe Faith and Justice Network
- Agir ensemble pour les droits de l'Homme (AEDH)
- CAFOD
- Cordaid
- Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI)
- Enough
- FreeFairElections
- Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect (GCR2P)
- Heal Africa
- International Crisis Group (ICG)
- International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
- Justitia et Pax Netherlands
- Ecumenical Network Central Africa (OeNZ)
- Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA)
- Open Society Institute-Brussels (OSI)
- Save the Congo
- Search for Common Ground (SFCG)
- Society for Threatened Peoples International
- Trocaire
- Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)

Congolese organizations

- African Association for Human Rights (ASADHO)
- Bureau pour le Volontariat au service de l'Enfance et de la Sante (BVES)
- Coalition for Peaceful and Transparent Elections (AETA), a coalition of 12 Congolese organizations
- Eglise du Christ au Congo (ECC) - Programme de rapatriement, démobilisation des réfugiés combattants

étrangers

- Groupe Lotus
- Journalistes en Danger (JED)
- Ligue des électeurs
- Pole Institute
- Solidarité et Assistance Intégrale aux Personnes Démunies (SAIPD)
- Voix des sans Voix (VSV)