

Guinea-Bissau ready for 'peaceful, free and fair' legislative election on Sunday, says UN

After months of preparation, on the day before casting their ballots, Guinean voters are all set for a "peaceful, free and fair" national election, the United Nations said on Saturday.

With UN support, 21 parties are battling to hold, for four years, 102 seats in the National Assembly. Preliminary results are expected on Monday.

As required by electoral law, the 21 parties paused their activities on Saturday for a day of reflection. And while t-shirts continued to be distributed and worn by their supporters, not a sound of campaign promises or candidate speeches was heard.

Speaking to *UN News*, the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security of the Commission of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), General Francis Behanzin, said that "everything is ready", the security situation "is OK" and the "campaign happened very well".

He said that the parties are talking to each other, calling it "a very good thing for democracy in West Africa".

Local election monitor in Guinea-Bissau., by Alexandre Soares.

"After the election," he concluded, "we will address the challenge of development".

Citing, among other things, donor fatigue in raising funds for the national election, Julia Alhinho, head of public communications at the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNIOGBIS), told *UN News* "Everything is ready in spite of all difficulties".

"We expect that it is peaceful, free and fair", she attested.

Gearing up

From the hotels in the capital, dozens of international observers from the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) and others were sent to locations deemed important to the elections' success throughout the country.

The UN's technical support of the process included training 80 police officers, 400 members of civil society, 450 electoral officers and 120 journalists.

“Support of international community [is] vital and much appreciated for monitoring of free, fair and secure elections”, [David McLachlan-Karr](#), the UN Resident Coordinator there [tweeted](#) on Friday, saying that UNIOGBIS had briefed election observers from the AU, ECOWAS, CPLP, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Pre-election Security Council visit

Prior to the elections, the Security Council visited Guinea-Bissau last month to [monitor and evaluate](#) the crisis resolution process in this country.

While there, the delegation met with the Speaker of the National Assembly, the leaders of political parties, the President of the National Electoral Commission, the President of the Supreme Court and representatives of civil society, as well as with President José Mario Vaz.

[FROM THE FIELD: Rebuilding Yemen's future from the ground up](#)

The ongoing conflict in Yemen has had a devastating impact on the Gulf country and while UN agencies continue to meet the immediate humanitarian needs of the Yemeni people, at least one UN agency has already begun planning for a future without war.

Many children are not being educated in Yemen due to the ongoing civil war. (February 2019), by UNDP Yemen

The UN Development Programme, UNDP, is supporting the people of Yemen, its communities and institutions, for when the fighting ends, by helping to rebuild dignity and prosperity through a series of interventions.

Cash-for-work programmes are helping rehabilitate small-scale but vital infrastructure, such as wells and schools. Some small businesses have been restarted with grants from UNDP.

[Read more here](#) about how the people of Yemen are rebuilding their future, one brick at a time.

Peace deal holds in South Sudan, but humanitarian funding 'ultimately unsustainable,' says top UN envoy

September's UN-backed South Sudan peace agreement is holding and has led to positive change, but tens of thousands of civilians in the war-weary nation are still reliant of life-saving humanitarian assistance, and time is running out. This was the message that David Shearer, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for South Sudan, relayed to the Security Council on Friday.

Mr Shearer outlined four notable changes in the country since the signing of the accord. Firstly, opposition politicians are now moving freely around the capital, Juba, and taking part in negotiations to cement the fragile peace deal.

The top envoy who also heads the UN Mission, [UNMISS](#), also described a "palpable" enthusiasm for peace amongst the participants of around 70 different peace-related forums involving representatives of the Government and main opposition figures, many of which have been facilitated by the mission.

The third positive outcome is a significant drop in political violence, meaning that "many people are alive today who might not have been without the agreement signed," said Mr. Shearer. Finally, he told Council members, South Sudanese are, for the first time, expressing a willingness to return home. Some 135,000 of the estimated 2.3 million refugees in the country have already made the move.



UN Photo/Loey Felipe

David Shearer, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for South Sudan and Head of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), briefs the Security Council.

Mr. Shearer acknowledged, however, that the peace process faces several challenges. In Central Equatoria region, for example, forces that have not joined the peace process continue to fight government soldiers, with reports of lootings, civilian deaths and continuing sexual assaults.

Ensuring that perpetrators of sexual violence are brought to justice is a vital part of the reconciliation, said Mr. Shearer, and UNMISS is working with the Government to build up the capacity of the justice system to deal with these crimes, operating a mobile court system by flying prosecutors and judges out to hotspots, and opening a new UN-supported special court to try crimes of sexual and gender-based violence, he noted.

Maintaining the momentum of the peace process is another significant challenge, said the UN Special Representative, with the agreed timetable well behind schedule, and several fundamental issues still to be resolved. These include the definition of regional boundaries, the formation of a unified armed force, and the completion of a new constitution.

Humanitarian aid still a lifeline for thousands

Although South Sudan has seen relatively stability for some five months, the population is still facing high levels of food insecurity, and an absence of health and education services.

Mr. Shearer pointed out that the aid received by South Sudan in 2018 – some \$1 billion – is more than twice the country's state budget, a situation he described as unsustainable: "It is a reality that South Sudan's leaders often forget – or take for granted – that their country is supported by taxpayers around the world."

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The UN envoy added that UNMISS and other agencies are focusing on building up the resilience of communities in more stable regions of the country, in order to promote a shift away from reliance on aid.

Mr. Shearer warned that there are just two months to go until a transitional government – which will include representatives of the main opposition – is scheduled to take office, and that a failed peace process could herald a return to violence: "The cost of failure is unthinkable. So, while responsibility lies primarily with the parties to the conflict, it also is beholden on us all to ensure that we move forward together to make this agreement a reality for the sake of the people of South Sudan."

International Women's Day: Empowering more women decision-makers 'essential', says Guterres

Under the theme "Think Equal, Build Smart, Innovate for Change", the United Nations hosted its flagship event celebrating [International Women's Day](#) on Friday to recognize unsung women from across the world, and encourage innovation to transform lives.

UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) opened the event by enumerating some of the world's collective challenges, "from climate change...to the weakening of commitment to multilateralism," stressing that "gender equality and [women's rights are fundamental](#) to addressing each of these".

"We can only re-establish trust and rebuild global solidarity by challenging historic injustices and promoting the rights and dignity of all", he maintained. "We can only achieve sustainable development and peace by drawing on all our assets and capacities."

"Gender equality is fundamentally a question of power" he stated, saying that a still male-dominated world has "ignored, silenced and oppressed women for centuries – even millennia".

Despite women's achievements and successes, their voices are still routinely overlooked, and their opinions ignored, with everyone paying the price for inequality and oppression.

"Increasing the number of women decision-makers is essential", Mr. Guterres remarked, adding that the UN has reached gender parity among its leaders around the world.

Shocking statistics

[General Assembly President](#) María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés told the event that she had mixed feelings about the Day.

"On the one hand, it is important that we celebrate the gains we have made", she said, noting that Barbados, Ethiopia, Georgia, Romania and Trinidad and Tobago welcomed their first female leaders last year and, among other firsts, Uruguay saw its first conviction for femicide.

However, she regretted that nearly four decades after the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) was adopted and some 25 years after the landmark [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), "we are still not even close to equal".

On pretty much any measure of development, women are behind, she said. “Every woman and girl knows that her lived reality is very different to that of her father or brother” Ms. Espinosa said, adding: These statistics are shocking”.

Noting that just 11 years remain to reach the [Sustainable Development Goals](#), she spelled out: “We desperately need to close the gender education gap and get more women into science and technology”.

In a bid to push women forward, she encouraged the support of grassroots organization, “to take the fight into our communities and into the corridors of power”. To boost the number and diversity of women in leadership positions, on 12 March she will convene a high-level event on “Women in Power”.

Ms. Espinosa concluded her address by recalling “Audre Lorde’s powerful words: ‘I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.’”

The Chair of the UN [Commission on the Status of Women](#), Geraldine Byrne Nason, recalled the early days of the UN, when “women were few and far between”.

“It took us quite some time for our voices to be heard and for our messages to register”, she stated, but today “we are sitting centre-stage and we have absolutely no plans to lower the volume”.

Get inspired and innovate, to lead the way

The event host and Executive Director of [UN Women](#), Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, said that “we want women and girls themselves to be inspired to innovate and influence the whole ecosystem of innovation.”

“Women are not simply consumers of prescribed solutions, they also design solutions for whole societies and they are equipped to address the issues that affect their lives”, she told the group.

She said her equality and empowerment agency was “injecting the gender lens in the DNA of innovation” adding: “Women and girls have a vital role to play in the fourth industrial revolution, shaping the policies, services and infrastructures that affect their lives.”

Education propels you to far-away places

Delivering the keynote speech, former Director of the Johnson Space Centre in the United States, Ellen Ochoa – the first female Latina astronaut – credits her education in science with propelling her into four outer space missions.

She said her mother had been a role-model who took one college course each semester for 20 years to earn her bachelor’s degree, underscoring to her family, the importance of education. Ms. Ochoa herself emphasized that it was essential that girls study science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, known as STEM.

“Engineering, development and innovation is about curiosity, creativity,

working with teams and solving problems,” she explained, saying “Girls love to do those things!”

But describing the uphill struggle for women to be admitted to astronaut training programmes, she credited activists working tirelessly to change the laws, adding that she was pleased now to serve as a role model for “girls around the world who are dreaming big dreams”.

UN rights team heading to Venezuela may pave way for official mission led by Bachelet

A United Nations human rights team is to begin an official visit to Venezuela on Monday at the invitation of the Government, potentially paving the way for an official mission to Caracas by the UN’s top rights official, [Michelle Bachelet](#).

Five staff members are to tour the country from 11 to 22 March, her office, [OHCHR](#), said on Friday, amid a [protracted crisis](#), arising from a faltering economy, political instability, and violent anti-Government demonstrations.

The announcement follows an initial invitation last November from President Nicolas Maduro to High Commissioner Bachelet, which was reiterated by Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza at the current [Human Rights Council](#) session in Geneva.

“During its visit, the team will seek to meet with Government officials, representatives of the National Assembly, civil society organisations and victims of human rights violations,” OHCHR said in a statement. “The team will visit Caracas, as well as other cities in a number of states in Venezuela.”

‘Standard practice’ ahead of High Commissioner visit

The High Commissioner’s office added that it is “standard practice” for a technical team to be deployed ahead of a “possible” visit by her.

This is to ensure that Ms. Bachelet would have “unfettered access to the people and places she would need to visit, to be able to gain a clear understanding of the human rights situation in the country”, OHCHR’s statement explained.

UNHCR centre opens in Colombia for vulnerable Venezuelans

In another development, the UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), announced on Friday

that it has opened a reception centre in Colombia for the most vulnerable Venezuelans crossing the border.

Thousands of Venezuela nationals are still leaving the country every day and UNHCR spokesperson Andrej Mahecic said that many of them have resorted to living on the streets in neighbouring Colombia.

The new facility in the border city of Maicao, in La Guajira region, has space for 350 people, with room for expansion if necessary, the UNHCR official explained.

"A significant number of Venezuelans in Maicao are living on the streets or in informal settlements and 81 per cent of those interviewed, said that they required shelter," Mr. Mahecic said.

Colombia's generosity praised but reception capacity 'overwhelmed'

Colombia now hosts more than one million Venezuelans, who despite the authorities' generosity and open-border policy, have overwhelming humanitarian needs, according to UNHCR.

"Over 3.4 million Venezuelans are living abroad, of whom 2.7 million have left the country since 2015," Mr. Mahecic said. "Colombia is the country that is most affected by the outflow, with over 1.1 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants."

To help them, the new centre will provide shelter, food, water, basic medical care, and other services in the centre, on a short-term basis.

"It's a reception centre which will basically serve to provide immediate support to the most vulnerable categories" Mr. Mahecic said." That may involve unaccompanied children, children who may have been separated from their families, vulnerable women, people who have disabilities, and so on. It is not meant to provide a permanent shelter on a long-term basis."

'5,000 people leave Venezuela every day'

This year, the UN agency is appealing for more than \$730 million to help more than nearly three million Venezuelans and host communities in 16 countries.

"On average, we still see that about 5,000 people cross into the neighbouring countries, and from those neighbouring countries then proceed into other nations in the region," Mr. Mahecic said. "Those numbers obviously fluctuate, but this is the average that we have been seeing for quite some time."

To complement Colombia's efforts to provide international protection to those arriving at the border, UNHCR continues to scale up shelter, legal advice and access to basic services for people in "dire" need.