

DR Congo: UN envoy calls for 'a level playing field' in key upcoming elections

Major progress has been made on preparations for the upcoming elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but “conditions for a level playing field are not yet in place”, said the most senior United Nations official based in the country.

“While significant progress has been made to respect the stages of the calendar process, the electoral process continues to suffer from suspicion and mistrust between the majority and the opposition, and, between the opposition and the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI),” Leila Zerrougui, the UN [Special Representative](#) for the country and head of the Stabilization Mission, [MONUSCO](#), told the Security Council on Thursday.

She noted that preparations have reached an important turning point with the opening, on Wednesday, of candidate reception offices for presidential and legislative elections, due to take place on December 23.

However, the opposition has expressed multiple grievances, she added, including over voting machinery and electoral records.

“I am however encouraged to note that, in the face of disagreements highlighted above, and against the backdrop of immense logistical and financial challenges, all major political parties were able to successfully enrol candidates for provincial legislative elections,” she said.

After a slow start, more than 18,000 candidates for office registered, in order to contest 715 seats.

Conditions for a level playing field are not yet in place, and without progress on these fronts, the credibility and inclusivity of upcoming elections may be at risk – *Leila Zerrougui, head of MONUSCO*

Although the final tally is yet to be published, initial indications suggest that women make up less than 12 per cent of all registered candidates, she said, urging political parties to ensure greater female representation and participation in forthcoming elections.

Ms. Zerrougui said she remains concerned by violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms that continue to impact negatively on democratic space as some peaceful demonstrations are suppressed.

She also said that civil society actors and political opponents continue to

be arbitrarily arrested and media workers threatened.

“Thus, conditions for a level playing field are not yet in place, and without progress on these fronts, the credibility and inclusivity of upcoming elections may be at risk,” she warned.

“The Democratic Republic of Congo is at the crossroads. That’s the reason for which I appeal to all stakeholders to seize this opportunity to allow for inclusive, transparent and credible elections on 23 December to provide a more stable future for the DRC, Congolese women and Congolese,” she concluded.

[UN human rights experts urge Egypt to release jailed poet who penned hit protest song](#)

Galal El Behairy has been held in detention since February after penning a song critical of Egypt’s policies, prompting United Nations human rights experts on Thursday to urge the government to release him immediately.

The song ‘Balaha’, performed by Ramy Essam, went online on 26 February, with the music video quickly going viral and drawing over 3.7 million social media views.

Just five days later, Mr. El Behairy was arrested by National Security Police and detained for a week at an undisclosed location, before being charged with affiliating with terrorists, “disseminating false news, abusing social-media networks, blasphemy, contempt of religion and insulting the military” according to a statement released by six rights experts.

At the time of that first court appearance he showed signs of torture and beating. His first trial in Military Court began on 6 May, and after being delayed three times, sentencing is due to take place this coming Saturday. He remains in Tora Prison, in the capital Cairo.

“We are very worried at the reported criminalisation of the legitimate exercise of artistic expression through the imposition of a range of dubious charges,” said the experts.

“We are alarmed at the arrest and alleged ill-treatment of Mr. El Behairy which appears to be related solely to the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of artistic expression and creativity,” they added.

We have received allegations that it is increasingly common for

artists, activists and journalists to be arrested and detained on charges, such as 'publishing false news' – *UN rights experts*

The poet's detention takes place against a backdrop of restrictions to artistic and other forms of expression as well as to the right to participate in the country's cultural life.

"We have received allegations that it is increasingly common for artists, activists and journalists to be arrested and detained on charges, such as 'publishing false news'," said the experts.

In a separate case on similar charges, still under investigation by the High State-Security, Mr. El Behairy can be further detained for up to two years without trial.

"We urge the relevant authorities to investigate the alleged ill-treatment of Mr. El Behairy, and to acquit him of all charges related to the creative expression of his political views," stated the rights experts.

"We recall that all individuals have the right to participate in varied information exchanges, to contribute to artistic expression, and to take part in cultural life and in the development of their society, including through political debate and expression of opinion and dissent, without fear of sanction or reprisals," they concluded.

The rights experts are Karima Bennoune, [Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights](#); David Kaye, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the [right to freedom of opinion and expression](#); Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on [freedom of religion or belief](#); Seong Phil Hong, Chair-Rapporteur of the [Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#); Nils Melzer, Special Rapporteur on [torture](#) and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; and Bernard Duhaime, Chair-Rapporteur of the [Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances](#).

[UN chief strongly condemns terrorist attacks in south-west Syria](#)

The United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, has [strongly condemned](#) multiple suicide bombings on Wednesday in the government-held town of Sweida, in Syria's south-west, which killed and injured scores of civilians.

According to news reports, the attacks were claimed by the terrorist group ISIL, or Da'esh, which has been defending territory in the region from a major government offensive.

“He is appalled by the utter disregard for human life displayed by ISIL,” said UN Spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric, stressing that “those responsible for the attacks must be held accountable”.

The Secretary-General extended his condolences to the families of the deceased and wishes the injured a speedy recovery.

The UN Humanitarian Coordinator for the region, Ali al-Za'tari [called](#) for better “protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure and sparing them the brunt of violence and conflict wherever they are” in the war-torn country.

Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy for Syria who is attempting to bring the warring parties to the negotiation table, briefed the Security Council on Wednesday behind closed doors from Geneva, on the latest political and humanitarian situation.

[UNESCO gives sustainable development a boost; designates 24 new biosphere reserves](#)

Protecting mangroves, tropical rainforests and other biodiversity hotspots, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) bumped up its World Network of Biosphere Reserves by 24 new sites on Wednesday, which means that 686 unique natural sites in total are being preserved globally.

“Conserving the biodiversity and the management of natural resources in these ecosystems is a prerequisite for sustainable development,” declared UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay.

Among other things, [biosphere reserves](#) reconcile the conservation of biodiversity and human activity through the use of sustainable natural resources.

“These sites are laboratories of harmonious interaction between people and nature, allowing for advances in the sciences and in traditional knowledge,” continued Ms. Azoulay. “They facilitate the sharing of knowledge, promote the interaction between science and society and help bring concrete improvements to the lives of local populations.”



UNESCO/Guoyong Dong

Mount Huangshan Biosphere Reserve, China

Thanks to the new designations, a host of precious areas representing multiple different terrains – along with ecosystems that encompass marine, swamp, forest peat and freshwater environments – are now being conserved. The reserves are particularly important for biodiversity hotspots with vulnerable ecosystems, such as coral reefs, dunes, sea marshes, mangroves and forests.

While the Republic of Moldova and Mozambique have received biosphere reserves for the very first time, other countries with newly designated sites are Burkina Faso, China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea – commonly known as North Korea; Ecuador; and India.

These sites are laboratories of harmonious interaction between people and nature, allowing for advances in the sciences and in traditional knowledge – *UNESCO chief Audrey Azoulay*

Three new sites lie within Indonesia, with two in Italy and Kazakhstan; and Iran, Madagascar, the Netherlands, the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Russian Federation, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, the United Arab Emirates and the United Republic of Tanzania are also represented.

Moldova's newly designated Lower Prut biosphere reserve covers a mosaic of water, meadow and forest ecosystems. Agriculture there provides 90 per cent of inhabitants' income.

Located in the north of Mozambique, the newly designated Quirimbas consists of 11 islands that support 3,000 floral species, of which 1,000 are endemic; 23 species of reptiles; 447 species of birds; 46 species of terrestrial mammals, including four of the "big five" – elephant, lion, buffalo and leopard – together with eight species of marine mammals, including whales and

dolphins.

Ecosystems not only support a number of globally significant activities, including fishing, agriculture, animal breeding and tourism, but also provide habitats for migratory birds, rare animals and endangered species.



UNESCO/A. Yakovlev

Big Stone River, Mountainous Urals Biosphere Reserve, Russian Federation.

These natural resources allow for activities compatible with sustainable development and protecting ancestral traditions.

According to UNESCO, biosphere reserves in Germany and Italy, have been extended with name changes, while five in Australia, one in the Netherlands and another in the United States, have been withdrawn from the Network at the countries' request.

Every year the International Coordinating Council of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, adds new sites.

[Pakistan: UN chief condemns suicide attack that killed dozens near polling station](#)

The United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, on Wednesday [condemned](#) the killing of dozens of people near a polling station in the

western city of Quetta due to a suicide attack, as voters headed to the polls in Pakistan's general elections.

The suicide bombing that killed at least 31 people and injured another 70 was claimed by the ISIL, or Da'esh terrorist group, according to news reports. The country has been witnessing outbursts of violence across the country in the lead-up to Wednesday's parliamentary and provincial assembly elections.

The elections mark only the second time that one civilian government has handed on power to the other, after serving a full term in office.

"The Secretary-General condemns the suicide attack at a polling station in Quetta claimed by Da'esh," said Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric in a statement. "He extends his heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims and to the Government and people of Pakistan."

Despite the violence, news outlets reported that millions of Pakistanis showed up to cast their vote. The 85,000 polling stations closed on Wednesday by 7 pm, local time.

The UN Spokesperson stressed that "the United Nations stands in solidarity with, and supports the efforts of the Government of Pakistan, in the fight against terrorism."

The President of the UN General Assembly, Miroslav Lajčák, also condemned the attack, which he called "despicable".

The suicide bombing in Quetta followed on from a series of terrorist attacks earlier in the month, including one in Mastung, in which 153 people lost their lives.