

DR Congo: days ahead 'critical' to 'historic election process' Security Council hears

With millions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) demonstrating “their commitment to the political process”, the days ahead are “critical” to what has been an “historic election process”, the top UN official in the country told the Security Council on Friday.

Leila Zerrougui, Special Representative and head of the UN Stabilization Mission ([MONUSCO](#)), said that Congolese voters had shown “impressive maturity” and patience during the presidential poll, which finally took place on 30 December, two years later than originally planned.

“We must, therefore, show our collective solidarity with them, as the electoral process is finalized, and as the Democratic Republic of the Congo prepares to undertake the first peaceful transfer of power in the country’s history”, Ms. Zerrougui said via video conference.

The provisional election result declared Felix Tshisekedi the winner on Wednesday, but another leading opposition candidate, Martin Fayulu – who heads the Lamuka coalition – has now formally challenged the vote in court, accusing the authorities of electoral fraud. This opposition to the vote, said Ms. Zerrougi, had the potential “to provoke disorder throughout the country”.

According to Ms. Zerrougui, all national and international observation missions, as well as MONUSCO teams deployed on the ground, reported that despite technical, logistical and security problems, citizens had not been hindered in exercising their right to vote, adding that the delayed publication of results, had not led to any breakdown in public order.

She told the Council that reactions to CENI’s announcement had been “swift and varied”, and welcomed Mr. Tshisekedi, who vowed to be a president “for all Congolese”.

‘Supreme sense of responsibility’ must prevail

Ms. Zerrougui told Council members there had been some “serious security incidents”, including violent protests in Kwilu province that have reportedly left at least twelve dead. She said that MONUSCO teams were being deployed there to determine the facts and “engage with a view to de-escalating tension”.

Injuries, arrests and unverified deaths were also reported in Kisangani, the country’s third largest city, and several locations in Kasai province. Meanwhile a “tense situation” also prevails in several Kinshasa communes.

“I deplore all such acts of violence, and appeal to the Congolese people and security forces alike to exercise calm and restraint in this critical period”, she underscored.

With the final results expected to be announced within a week, she said she would “continue to discharge my good offices, engaging with all Congolese stakeholders, to reinforce the need for calm and recourse to established judicial procedures and to emphasize that a supreme sense of responsibility must prevail through the days ahead.”



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Leila Zerrougui (on screen-left), Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), briefs the Security Council on 11 January 2019.

‘Overriding goals’ reached by Congolese people: CENI

Also via video link, Corneille Nangaa, President of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI), spoke at length of the tremendous difficulties throw up by the long process towards polling day and beyond, adding that “there was not a single decision that was not challenged”.

Notwithstanding the significant snags, 40 million voters were successfully registered, and the election took place amid relative calm.

He underscored that “three overriding goals” had been achieved by the Congolese people: a refusal to accept changes to the constitution; resisting the desire for a third term the current Head of State, Joseph Kabila, who has ruled for 18 years; and that for the first time in nearly 60 years, there would now be a transfer of power at the highest level.

Mr. Nangaa paid tribute to 32 CENI staff who gave their lives in service to the democratic process, concluding that CENI “has done what it was able to

do.”

Speaking in the chamber on behalf of the African Union (AU), Fatima Kyari Mohammed informed the Council that while there had been as many as 75,000 polling stations and the AU was only able to dispatch an election mission to a limited number, reports from there had been positive.

She elaborated that the polls opened on time; all materials were available; polls were carried out in a calm and peaceful atmosphere; candidate representatives were present; and the election was conducted within the legal framework.

Joseph Malanji, Foreign Minister of Zambia, enumerated some of the “historical challenges” that the election process had thrown up, including a warehouse fire just days before the poll that destroyed thousands of voting machines, an Ebola outbreak in the east, and continuing violence.

Notwithstanding these hurdles, he made clear that the elections were managed in a “peaceful and calm atmosphere.”

Bishop urges ‘path of true peace’

In contrast, Bishop Otembi of the Catholic Bishops’ National Episcopal Conference of the Congo (CENCO) said that their analysis of the presidential election did not correspond to the CENI-announced results.

Church authorities, which play a powerful role in Congolese society, deployed around 40,000 monitors for the 30 December vote.

The bishop called for the Security Council to express its solidarity with the Congolese people, and invited the UN body to request the publication of official notes from each polling station, so that the tallies and data could be compared with those of CENI, to remove all doubt.

He urged the Council to invite the parties in the potentially fraught days ahead, to favour “the path of truth and peace”.

‘Critical test’ for North Korea’s Government as civilian suffering remains rife, warns UN rights expert

The human rights situation in Democratic People’s Republic of Korea – DPRK – remains “extremely serious”, and along with international demands for denuclearization, this constitutes a “a critical test” for the year ahead, a senior UN-appointed expert [said](#) on Friday.

Tomás Quintana was speaking in his capacity as UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in DPRK, commonly known as North Korea; his press conference was held in the South Korean capital, Seoul, as he continued to be denied access to its northern neighbour.

The whole country is a prison – *anonymous statement provided to UN expert Tomás Quintana*

“Of those who left the North recently that I interviewed during this mission, every person gave accounts of ordinary people being subjected to exploitative labour and serious human rights violations such as forced evictions in the name of development,” he said. “Stories were told to me of people, including children, being subjected to long hours of labour where they were forced to work without remuneration.... One person concluded: “the whole country is a prison.”

Mr. Quintana urged the DPRK authorities to engage with his mandate and allow him to visit the country “to hear the voice of the people and the authorities”.

Many ordinary people ‘being left behind’

He detailed personal testimonies gathered during his five-day mission about “political prison camps” which contain “thousands of people” accused of committing crimes against the State.

Their detention happens without “due process guarantees or fair trial, in a manner that amounts to enforced disappearances with the family not knowing their whereabouts”, the Special Rapporteur explained, before highlighting that people’s “fear” of being imprisoned was “very real and deeply embedded in the consciousness of the ordinary North Korean people”.

Surveillance and close monitoring of ordinary citizens is also a fact of life in DPRK, Mr. Quintana continued, as well as other restrictions on basic freedoms, not least the prohibition on leaving the country.

His comments follow a historic meeting between DPRK leader Kim Jong-Un and US President Donald Trump in Singapore last June, which focused on denuclearization talks.

Humanitarian aid remains ‘vital’

Noting that Kim had stated that “improving people’s standard of living radically” was a priority in his New Year message, Mr. Quintana said that this might represent “recognition” of economic and social hardships for ordinary people.

It “represents an important first step towards taking action to address the challenges,” the UN expert said, before calling on the international community to continue to support the “vital” humanitarian assistance that was being provided by various actors to the people of the DPRK.

“In particular, it is important that humanitarian cooperation is extended without politicization and in full respect of the principles of neutrality and independence,” he said, reiterating a call to the [UN Security Council](#) to ensure its sanctions do not have a detrimental impact on the people of the DPRK.

The findings of Mr. Quintana’s latest report will be delivered to the [Human Rights Council](#) in Geneva at its next regular session which begins in late February.

[Thousands risk lives fleeing fighting in Syria’s last ISIL stronghold](#)

North-east Syria is seeing increasing numbers of civilian casualties and large-scale displacement amid intensifying efforts to defeat extremists from ISIL, otherwise known as Da’esh, in Deir-ez-Zor governorate, the UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), said on Friday.

Speaking to journalists in Geneva, spokesperson Andrej Mahecic warned that, in recent months, clashes and airstrikes in the eastern governorate’s Hajin enclave – once part of an ISIL stronghold straddling the Syria and Iraq border – have forced tens of thousands of people to flee northwards in search of safety.

“Over the past six months more than 25,000 people have been displaced in that part of the country, said Mr. Mahecic. ‘We have seen an increase, especially with the escalation that has occurred in the course of December.’”

Those at risk include “many” women, children and the elderly, the UN official said, adding that many families reaching the safety of Al Hol refugee camp in north-east Syria near the border with Iraq had risked their lives to do so. “The dangerous and difficult journey and the conditions inside the enclave are reported to have led to the deaths of six children – all under 12 months. Most died after arriving at Al Hol, too weak to survive,” the UN spokesperson explained.

Emergency health teams in the camp are tending to “wounds, amputated limbs, injuries and frostbite”, Mr. Mahecic continued, before adding that some of those fleeing the fighting had spent “four nights or more” in the desert, in heavy rain and cold weather, with barely any belongings. “People coming out of the conflict zone do also have wounds that have been inflicted. We also know that many of them tell us that they have been targeted while they were fleeing.”

Urging all parties “and those with influence over them” to ensure freedom of

movement and safe passage for displaced families, the UNHCR spokesperson explained that the crisis is far from over. "This is still going on and people are arriving daily," Mr. Mahecic said. "Through the desert, trying to move through the different checkpoints and reach safety in the camps and other areas outside the conflict zone."

Together with its partners, UNHCR teams inside Syria prioritize protection for unaccompanied or separated children, while also identifying and helping those in need of medical assistance. Tents and other essential relief items are provided to new arrivals, while communal facilities are being scaled up to prepare for an expected increase of arrivals from Hajin.

"It's estimated right now that 2,000 people remain in the conflict-affected area of Hajin," Mr. Mahecic explained. "Those fleeing report increasingly desperate conditions, with diminishing services and extremely high prices for basic foods. We are worried for civilians who continue to be trapped in ISIL-held areas."

[‘Everyone must be on board’ for peace in Central African Republic: UN’s Lacroix](#)

The agreement by the Government and armed groups in the Central African Republic to hold talks later this month (CAR) is "an important step to resolve the country's crisis", said the [UN peacekeeping chief](#), Jean-Pierre Lacroix, on Thursday.

"Now there is a path, it is the path of dialogue. There is a date to start this dialogue, it's 24 January," said the head of the Department of Peace Operations (DPO), speaking to reporters in the capital Bangui. "There is an organization...which will convene and organize these discussions in Khartoum, it is the African Union," he added.

Mr. Lacroix has been in the country since Tuesday, alongside the African Union (AU) Commissioner for Peace and Security, Smail Chergui, in a bid to revive a stalled peace process. During his visit, he appealed for all international actors to ensure that 2019 is "the year of peace" for CAR.

Speaking before departing the country, Mr. Lacroix said that all Central Africans needed to be involved, adding that "everyone must be on board and everyone must be mobilized for it to succeed".

He called for a "period of dialogue and commitment to ensure that the country can turn the page of the violence", highlighting the importance of the

apparent momentum that represents a “chance for the Central African Republic”.

For his part, African Union Commissioner for Peace and Security, Smail Chergui, underlined “everyone’s” commitment to implement the initiative. “This is the moment, it is a historic moment for all, really, to stand together and look to the future of this country,” he added.

CAR has been grappling with violence since fighting between the mostly Christian anti-Balaka militia and the mainly Muslim Séléka rebel coalition broke out in 2012. While a peace agreement was reached in January 2013, rebels seized the capital that March, forcing then President François Bozizé to flee.

According to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#), in 2019, 2.9 million people, more than half of whom are children, will need humanitarian and protection assistance; more than 63 per cent of a population of 4.6 million.

Concerned with the security, humanitarian, human rights and political crisis within the country and its implications for the region, the UN Stabilization Mission in CAR, [MINUSCA](#) began operating in 2014 under [Chapter VII](#) of the [UN Charter](#).

With the protection of civilians as its utmost priority, Chapter VII provides for the use of force – meaning, with Security Council authority, peacekeepers may respond to acts of aggression in kind.

FROM THE FIELD: One boy’s journey from refugee camp to US school principal

After escaping from two years of captivity at the hands of Mai Mai rebels in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Bertine Bahige was relieved to end up in a UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)) camp, in faraway Mozambique.

He’d been forcibly taken from his family at 13, and thrown into the horrifying world of being a child soldier, before escaping his captors.

In 2004, he was one of the lucky ones to be resettled in Maryland, United States, where he landed a job taking out the trash at a fast-food restaurant. Eventually, his hard work, intelligence and enduring optimism landed him a university scholarship – way out in the Rocky Mountains.

Speaking at the UN last year in support of the [Global Compact on Refugees](#), Mr. Bahige shared the fascinating story of how he went from a child aspiring

to become a doctor in the DRC, to an elementary school principal in Wyoming with a wife and two children of his own.

“All refugees are asking for is an opportunity,” he said. [Read](#) the story here.