

Guinea-Bissau: Another Case of Wait and See?

By Evan Hoffman

23 June, 2009 – OTTAWA, Canada. Presidential elections are scheduled for later this month in the troubled West African nation of Guinea-Bissau and some members of the international community, including the US Department of State, are predicting that this election may plunge the country into further turmoil. Appallingly, others from the international community are going about their business as usual and taking a wait and see attitude, thus demonstrating once again an all too familiar pattern whereby the international community misses an opportunity to act to save lives before it is too late.

While political turmoil is not new to this tiny country, the circumstances surrounding this particular election are indeed unique. This election is being held because in March of this year the President had been brutally murdered after a bomb attack had killed the Head of the Armed Forces, causing some to speculate that this was a revenge killing. Following that, there had been other violence directed against some former and current political figures, including the murders of a presidential candidate and a former defense minister earlier this month. Thus, a disturbing trend of increasing violence among the country's political and military elite seems to be forming.

The question is whether this growing trend will now decline with the upcoming presidential elections? Unfortunately, any way you look at it, the upcoming elections will very likely trigger further violence because what seems to be fueling the trend of increased political violence is an elite-level power struggle and the elections are going to create a major shift of power in the country. This is a typical pattern found in other politically-fragile countries, and it has also been previously evidenced in some of Guinea-Bissau's other elections so there is a very good chance this may occur again.

The lack of a well-coordinated and sufficiently-resourced response from the international community to avert this potential violence is also not new. For example, the Security Sector Reform (SSR) process – viewed by many as a key to achieving stability in the country - has had a painfully slow start even though various planning meetings and assessment missions have occurred over the last five years in order to produce well developed SSR plans. Reconciliation, another often mentioned key to achieving a lasting peace in Guinea-Bissau, has had perhaps an even worse track record than security sector reform and concrete reconciliatory actions have been few and far between.

The difference this time, however, is that a credible warning that violence is very likely following the upcoming elections has been made. Clearly, the international community now has an important role to play in taking such warnings seriously and initiating appropriate follow-up actions. These actions need not be large or risky because sometimes even small and timely actions are enough. For example, mediation among a handful of key political actors and sending a small contingent of UN Civilian Police to help local security forces maintain law and order could have major impacts. The international community thus has to take action now before it misses yet another opportunity to save lives because it instead chose to take the usual wait and see attitude.

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