25 May 2016  Madina Dia

Officers of armed groups attend a sensitization session led by Madina Dia (Senegal) (right), UNV Electoral Advisor with MINUSCA’s Electoral Assistance Division, Bambari Regional Office. (MINUSCA, 2015)

Former combatants stand for election after civic education by UN Volunteer in CAR

**Bangui, Central African Republic:** In 2012, the Central African Republic was plunged into a political and military crisis. The spiral of violence triggered instability and the collapse of the State. The consequences were devastating: people fled their villages, their country, Christians and Muslims were divided, amidst the proliferation of armed groups. Holding elections, despite the support of the international community, was a great challenge. In Bambari, capital of the Ouaka Prefecture, two armed groups, Anti-Balaka (ABLK) and EX-Seleka (X-SLK), coexist.

Their frequent confrontations divided the city into two zones - the mainly Muslim left bank and the mainly Christian right bank the Ouaka River. In this context, how does one organize credible, transparent and inclusive elections? The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) set up regional electoral offices in the prefecture.
My name is Madina Dia. I am from Senegal and as the UN Volunteer Electoral Advisor, I am responsible for electoral civic education in Oauka. I collaborated with local elections authorities to develop strategies for peaceful elections. This turned out to be a good practice in the last election in December 2015 from which lessons also were learnt.

**Transforming the discourse of violence or weapons in a political debate**

A strong presence of armed groups and the polarization between Christians and Muslims impose constraints on the everyday lives of citizens. The implementation of a strategy of participation or acceptance in the electoral process was one of our successes. So saying, it was particularly important to involve these armed group members in the electoral process, as citizens and not as an unconventional group. The restoration of the rule of law requires the acceptance of these groups as often, as in the case of Ouaka, they constitute a real force of security, economic strength and even a "state" within the state.

The Bambari Electoral Office held outreach meetings with all armed groups and, despite their status and their rejection of the transitional institutions, a relationship of trust could be established. Information was shared on the role and mandate of the Electoral Division, the local elections authority, and the importance of the elections to provide the country with democratically elected institutions.

We also focused on the reconciliation between the state and the population, especially to ensure that elections remain the democratic means of transferring power. On the other hand, training and awareness sessions on the various phases of the elections were held with the leaders of the armed groups and their representatives.

As a result, the armed groups participated massively as voters and as candidates in the electoral process. Overall, the results of the electoral process were accepted, and the armed groups saw the elections as a solution to their problems and the crisis. They sensitized their elements on these issues and prioritized the national interest.

A non-aggression pact was signed between the armed groups during the electoral process. Citizens, voters and local elections authority members were free to circulate during the election period without being subject to the payment of “taxes” at the illegal barriers.

Following such campaigns of sensitization, training, and local communication on the role of the elections as the legal means to access power, independent legislative candidates from armed groups registered to serve their country. On the Ndassima Bambari Axis in Ouaka, the armed groups provided the security of the electoral materials during their transport.

**Recommendations**

In countries in crisis, the participation of armed groups in the electoral process is beneficial, as their participation legitimizes the process, while providing them with the means to
change their illegal status. We recommend that:

- They submit their candidatures for legislative elections accompanied by the disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation (DDRR) process;
- Help be provided for their inclusion in the political life if they were not deprived of this right;
- The disarmament process precede the elections.

Sub-Saharan Africa

- Central African Republic • CAR • disarmament process

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions