

**5 December 2008**

## **IN SPITE OF THE WAR: PREPARE THE LOCAL ELECTIONS AND THE DECENTRALISATION IN THE DRC**

December 6<sup>th</sup> 2008 marks the second anniversary of Joseph Kabila becoming President of the DRC's Third Republic. His investiture followed the results of the presidential, legislative and provincial elections during which the network of European NGOs for Central Africa, EurAc and the coordinating body of Congolese civil society for the observation of elections (CDCE) were present with a large contingent of independent observers.

These elections were historical: they marked a significant step forward, giving a strong roof to the institutional building of the Congolese state. But, as any architect will confirm, a building with a strong roof with no solid walls will not last. These walls can only be provided through local elections and the decentralisation. The ongoing war gives evidence of how fragile the Congolese state is at present.

The elections of 2006 did enable a process of democratisation in the DRC to begin. Nevertheless such a process will not result in genuine democracy unless a new culture of governance can be developed. This is one of the many challenges related to decentralisation: it must aim to reconstruct the state and give it greater credibility. It should also be a training school for democracy, providing a chance for citizens to exercise political responsibility at the level of the *municipalités* and the *secteurs*.

A *sine qua non* for the success of this process is the creation of mechanisms which give citizens control and provide for proper questioning of government officials to make them more transparent and responsible for their actions as well as for their management of public funds. Similar principles of transparency and liability must apply equally to the management of mineral and forest resources, the illicit exploitation of which has become a major reason for the continuing impunity. Without such principles, decentralisation will fail to help renew the political landscape at grass roots level or to give an impulse to a more harmonious form of economic development based on community initiative.

Also, in spite of renewed fighting in the east of the DRC, dramatic though it is in its political, economic and humanitarian consequences, the Congolese authorities ought not to give up preparing for local elections and putting decentralisation plans into effect. On the contrary, the government should see these actions as one of the medium term solutions for a final resolution of the current crisis.

Since the organisation of local elections is an unprecedented technical and logistical challenge and since decentralisation is complex and highly sensitive, the DRC will not succeed in achieving these objectives on its own.

Therefore EurAc urges the European Union and its member states to commit themselves strongly to these two processes and it calls on them to:-

- 1) provide technical, methodological, logistical, material and financial assistance for the holding of local elections and to set in motion the process of decentralisation. Such assistance needs to be accompanied and supported by diplomatic and political pressure to ensure that the Congolese government takes on board the participative dimension. The international community must help create and protect a space in which civil society and the media can play their role as watchdogs. The ownership and therefore the direction of this process must remain entirely in the hands of the Congolese state through the institutions of the Third Republic.
- 2) promote the strong involvement of civil society in the form of civic and electoral education. The complex nature of the concepts and the fact that democracy is only at an embryonic stage makes grass roots sensitisation and mobilisation vital. Congolese civil society thus deserves to be supported and strengthened through international aid. For this support to have an impact, it must be administered flexibly and not be constrained by such bureaucratic procedures as on several occasions prevented effective action on the part of civil society at the time of the 2006 elections.
- 3) make the utmost effort to stop the war, which risks overturning the institutions of the Third Republic and threatening the gains which the peace process has produced. These risks could destroy the impact of all the efforts, including the financial ones, which have been made over the last ten years to resolve the state's crisis of legitimacy and to restore constitutional order. For EurAc's position regarding the events in eastern Congo please refer to our declarations made on 26 September and 7 November 2008.

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