

**Remarks by
Ambassador Marcia Bernicat
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“African Initiatives for
Peace and Stability in West Africa”
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Thank you for having me here today and for giving me the opportunity to participate in your discussion on “African Initiatives for Peace and Stability in West Africa.” It is good to be here at Villa Malolo, the Goree Institute’s beautiful facility here on the Island, and to have the chance to be a part of the your excellent work promoting sustainable peace and reconciliation in West Africa. I would like to use the situation in Guinea-Bissau as a mechanism through which to explore the theme of this conference. It highlights many of the challenges of securing stability in one of this region’s most troubled countries and the potential cost of leaving those challenges unaddressed.

As many of you know, my tenure in Dakar is drawing to a close. One of the most daunting challenges I have faced during my time here – in fact, one of the most daunting challenges I have faced in my 30 years of diplomatic service – has been to find a way to help restore stability and the rule of law in Guinea-Bissau. Without question, the main threat to stability in Guinea-Bissau is the country’s bloated military – a legacy of the country’s war for independence and civil war; the military’s role in the drug trade; and the lack of effective civilian control over the military.

The military’s virtually unchecked power is best illustrated by the mutiny that took place on April 1 of last year. In the course of a day, soldiers arrested the Military Chief of Staff, General Zamora Induta, and detained Prime Minister Carlos Gomes Junior. General Induta, who was never formally charged with any crime, was held illegally for nine months until his release in late December. Prime Minister Gomes’ detention, though shorter, was nonetheless brutal. After being beaten, robbed, and threatened with death, he was allowed to go. It is a testimony to the Prime Minister’s personal bravery and dedication to his country that he returned to his post and continues to serve as Prime Minister.

What is striking about the events of April 1 is not so much what happened, but what did not happen in the wake of the mutiny. Were the mutineers arrested? Did they flee after troops who were loyal to the country’s constitution came to the rescue of the Chief of Staff and the Prime Minister? Did the plotters resign in disgrace from their command? In a word, “No.” Instead, the leaders of the mutiny were promoted or re-instated into positions they previously held. This outcome is shocking and gives even the most jaded observer cause for thought.

The reaction of the international community to the events of April 1 is also telling and underlines the importance of having “African solutions to African problems. “The April 1 mutiny, simply put, froze western donors in their tracks. The EU suspended its security

sector reform program and the U.S. Government cut off virtually all military-to-military programs. The lack of a reliable partner in the security sector and the lawlessness and culture of impunity that prevail in the country continues to hinder our efforts to provide the kind of support the people of Guinea-Bissau need.

In this environment, I am thrilled that ECOWAS rose to the challenge and has taken on the task of working with Bissau-Guinean authorities to successfully implement a security sector reform program that will restructure the military and strengthen the law enforcement agencies fighting drug trafficking through the country.

ECOWAS is ideally positioned to work on security sector reform in Guinea-Bissau. As the foremost regional organization in West Africa, with over thirty years of experience in the region, ECOWAS understands the political and cultural context which will be so important in ensuring successful security sector reform. In addition, ECOWAS has made a smart move by partnering with the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP). The partnership will benefit Angola's security sector reform experience and on Portuguese language skills of the Angolan military and the Brazilian police.

By starting the reform process and by facilitating a dialogue among the principal stakeholders in Guinea-Bissau about the appropriate role of the military in society, ECOWAS and the CPLP are laying the foundation for increased and sustained stability in Guinea-Bissau.

However, military reform is only one part of successful security sector reform. In order to guarantee stability, the rule of law, and bring to an end the culture of impunity that has emboldened drug traffickers in Guinea-Bissau, security sector reform must also increase the capacity of the judicial and law enforcement sectors. To this end, the U.S. Government has recently assigned an experienced Judicial Sector Advisor to work with Bissau-Guinean attorneys and judges to increase their ability to bring transnational criminals to trial in Guinea-Bissau. In addition, a Regional Law Enforcement Advisor, based in Benin, will help Bissau-Guinean law enforcement authorities to increase their ability to fairly implement existing laws.

None of these efforts are short-term. It is going to take years to make the kinds of major adjustments successful security sector reform entails, and yes, there will be setbacks. Nothing that is so important is ever easy. But though the challenge is great, we cannot afford to walk away.

Failure to see security sector reform through to a successful conclusion in Guinea-Bissau would have disastrous consequences for the people of Guinea-Bissau and for other countries in the region. Corruption, violence, and a lack of rule of law have already severely inhibited economic growth and encouraged Bissau-Guineans to move away from their homes and families in search of economic opportunities. Similarly, as drugs move through the region, they destroy efforts to encourage legitimate economic growth and political stability. When drug traffickers pay bribes to encourage officials to

look in the other direction or facilitate drug shipments, it creates an environment in which those legitimate businesses -- if they can operate at all -- are also expected to pay bribes to facilitate commerce.

I commend ECOWAS and the CPLP for taking the lead in laying the foundation for a new era in Guinea-Bissau's history. Yours is a effort we are looking for ways to support.

Finally, let me once again thank the Goree Institute and all of you for your work to further "African Initiatives for Peace and Stability in West Africa." We will look for your discussions here today to provide useful perspectives and action items we can use to support you.

You are the leaders in this effort, and we count on you to help develop the correct home-grown mechanisms that will lead to a future of peace and stability in the region.

Thank You!