

Remarks by Ambassador Alex Laskaris
at the National Democratic Institute conference
Mariador Palace Hotel, Conakry
February 20, 2013

Monsieur le Ministre de l'Administration du Territoire et de la Décentralisation,

Mesdames et Messieurs les Leaders politiques de la République de Guinée,

Monsieur le Chef de la Délégation de l'Union Européenne,

Madame la Directrice Pays du PNUD,

Monsieur le Directeur Afrique du *National Democratic Institute* NDI,

Monsieur le Directeur Résident du NDI,

Distingués Invités,

Mesdames et Messieurs,

Ginee nu hamee, won bore ...

I would like to thank NDI for your invitation to this event ... more importantly, I would like to thank the government and people of Guinea for allowing the international community to play a role in their electoral process.

Let us be clear on one important point ... we want free and fair elections run exclusively by Guinean institutions which enjoy the trust of the people, the political parties and civil society. Our ultimate goal is responsive and accountable governance for the benefit of all Guineans, and we believe that the democratic process offers the best hope.

As Americans and as guests in Guinea, we are honored that you accept us as trusted partners in your democratic transition.

In my culture, the first duty of a guest is to compliment his host.

I respect Guineans ... I respect the lengths they go to support their families ; I respect their energy, their enterprise and their ambition to create a better life for themselves, their families and their country. I respect the unity of the Guinean people, as well as the richness of their diverse cultures and traditions.

Over the last few days, we have seen government and opposition supporters demonstrating peacefully. Although a few bad elements tried to provoke violence, the behavior of the demonstrators and the security services show that Guineans respect:

- The right to demonstrate in support of political parties or causes;
- The duty of the security services to protect everyone involved;
- The obligation to protect private and public property;
- The ability to have a political debate free of hate speech or other chauvinistic rhetoric.

I support the call from the Grand Imam of Conakry and the Catholic Archbishop of Guinea, and other peace-loving Guineans. Whether the message comes in Friday prayers or Sunday mass, it must always be one in favor of peace and reconciliation.

With peace comes the necessity of dialog and possibility of progress. The reason we have competitive politics is because we usually disagree on questions of governance. The purpose of dialog is either to resolve those differences, or more often, to manage them ... to move ahead despite our differences.

As Americans in your country, we have no preferred party or individual ... in your political competition, we favor neither government nor opposition. We favor a free and transparent process.

Elections are the beginning, not the end of democracy. Elections are the people's opportunity to ask elemental questions of those who aspire to lead them :

- Who will turn on the lights and the taps?
- Who will ensure that the public service serves the public?
- Who will rebuild the roads?
- Who will put kids in school and graduates in jobs?
- Who will care for the sick and the elderly?

It is not for me, or any foreigner, to predict who in the political class is best able to meet these challenges. That is the job of Guineans acting through the democratic process.

There is, however, one thing I can predict. If Guineans are lured down the path of violence and chauvinism, none of these demands will ever be met.

No molotov cocktail, no machete, and no gun can run a school or a hospital. No angry rock-throwing young man can provide for a family. No act of police brutality can contribute to social welfare.

Peace and democracy are not magical solutions ... even when they are achieved, economic and social progresses are not guaranteed. All I can offer the people of Guinea is the simple observation that it will be easier to achieve your personal and national aspirations with peace and democracy than with violence and repression.

Acting through our support and NDI project RECOPPEL, we hope to remain your partners and friends in Guinea's peaceful development.

Thank you.