



**Public Affairs Officer  
Kristin M. Kane  
Remarks**

**Convention des Jeunes Reporters du Sénégal (CJRS) Workshop  
Kaolack, November 25, 2011**

Governor of Kaolack, (other protocol),

Good morning, and thank you for having me. Our Embassy in Dakar is happy to support this training to dialogue, share knowledge, and exchange lessons and experiences on issues that will strengthen the media coverage of the 2012 presidential elections.

Access to information is essential to the health of a democracy. First, it ensures that citizens make responsible, informed choices rather than acting out of ignorance or misinformation. Second, information serves as a “checking function” by ensuring that elected representatives uphold their oaths of office and carry out the wishes of those who elected them.

Many people in Senegal have asked us what is the U.S. position on the upcoming presidential elections in Senegal. The fact of the matter is that we do not have an opinion outside of wanting a fair and transparent process with a winner that reflects the authentic desires of the Senegalese people. Free and fair elections are one part of a functioning democracy. A free and professional press is another part – a very key part, and that is why we are supporting this training today. In the same way that we hope that Senegal will have free and fair elections, we hope that Senegalese journalists will practice strict adherence to professionalism: meaning objectivity, balance, and accuracy in reporting, both before, during, and after the election.

A strong media is important day in, day out, all year round – but perhaps never so important as during issues of national importance, and for Senegal, perhaps never so important as during these next several months. The Senegalese population will look to you for accurate information – you have an incredible power, but it is a power to be used wisely.

You will undoubtedly have many temptations, especially when days of reporting are long and when incentives are offered. Despite the temptations, you must remain true to your profession and your personal dignity – and ultimately, to your country and its people.

The Senegalese public is well-served when they are reading unbiased stories; when they are receiving complete and insightful reports; when it is clear which articles are factual accounts of what happened and which are opinion pieces – the latter to be marked clearly as such. This is advice and encouragement that we offer to you.

At the same time we encourage media outlet owners to provide adequate funding to you so that you are not influenced in the course of your work. We also hope that politicians and candidates respect the media's important role in the democratic process; but when they don't, that you as journalists make the right decision. You will have to answer the question, "Do I accept transportation, do I accept lunch, from this candidate when I know that he will then expect a positive story on his campaign?" Or maybe, "Do I have time to report on another candidate – perhaps a minor candidate up north, perhaps a female candidate whom few are paying attention to, but whom many should -- who has a lot to offer to the Senegalese people but nothing to offer me personally?"

There are lots of challenges to what I am saying today – and I hope to learn more about those challenges over the next couple of days that I am here with you.

I watched the 2000 elections in Senegal from Washington, DC, just as I was joining the U.S. diplomatic service. Senegal truly had the world's spotlight on it for that time: And the world was proud of what Senegal achieved. Once again, interest in Senegal is building around the world – and this is Senegal's moment to shine. You are a big part of that opportunity, and I hope that you will rise to the occasion. Coverage on Election Day is important, but all of your coverage, especially during the month of legal campaigning, is vital. In reality, the election season is already starting. On Monday, the PDS funded a group of international jurists to come to Dakar to discuss the validity of Wade's candidacy. Because there was an American former jurist involved, stories and headlines in media outlets talked about "a Franco-American alliance supporting Wade". Is this true? One private American citizen means that "America" – our government – supports Wade's candidacy? It is not true, but that is how some media portrayed it. It is vital that you report things accurately. If you ever have questions about America, U.S. Government policy, or our work in Senegal, my office in at the U.S. Embassy in Dakar is always ready and willing to answer your questions.

So please, if you haven't already, educate yourself on Senegalese elections – especially the electoral code. Avoid primordial sentiments. Refrain from ethnic, religious, and other divisive language that can cause tension. Cross check your information before publication or broadcast. If it's about the U.S. or "America", call me.

The U.S. government, including our Embassy in Dakar, believes strongly in the importance of a free press. You each work hard every day to face the obstacles in your way. Your job is complex: helping citizens understand their rights and responsibilities; making the public aware of the problems facing the country; criticizing those who don't have the country's best interests at heart.... All this requires journalists to have knowledge, but also to exercise wisdom in deciding what to write and how to write it. We salute you, and I wish you a very good continuation of your training workshop.