

New York, 27 October 2005

Secretary-General Kofi Annan's remarks at Ceremony of Endorsement for Principles of International Electoral Observation

President Carter, Secretary Albright, Distinguished guests, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen and my dear friends,

It is a pleasure to welcome you all to the United Nations, particularly the representatives of the two dozen organizations that are today endorsing the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation.

I am honoured to be joined by two dear friends who have been tireless champions of democracy during their distinguished public careers -- former US President Jimmy Carter and former Secretary of State Madeline Albright.

We are here to signal our endorsement of a pioneering initiative that should strengthen the role of the international community in supporting democratic elections around the world.

Just last month at the World Summit, the Member States of the United Nations reaffirmed that democracy is a universal value. The spread of democracy around the world has been one of the signal transformations of our times. Elections – observed by the international community, or assisted in other ways by it – are at the heart of this inspiring story.

It is a story interwoven with that of the United Nations itself. Our Organization was first called upon to observe elections in 1947 on the Korean Peninsula. Through the era of trusteeship and decolonisation, the United Nations supervised and observed plebiscites, referenda and elections worldwide. UN-monitored elections were key elements of the transitions to peace in places such as Namibia, Cambodia, and Central America – and in helping bring about the end to apartheid.

Today, the United Nations rarely fields its own observers. This task is more commonly carried out by regional organizations and international NGOs, frequently in conjunction with national groups. But electoral assistance remains a strategic and high-profile activity for the United Nations, particularly in nations emerging from conflict or undergoing fragile political transitions -- from Afghanistan to Burundi to Iraq, and just a few weeks ago in Liberia where President Carter participated.

Credible elections can be a crucial step in the transition from war to peace. However, unfair or fraudulent elections can become detonators of conflict. Elections can also be misused by those wanting to create an appearance of democracy without permitting its substance.

The presence of international election observers -- fielded always at the invitation of sovereign States -- can make a big difference in ensuring that elections genuinely move the democratic process forward. Their mere presence can dissuade misconduct, ensure transparency, and inspire confidence in the process. The public statements made by observer missions, both before and after an election, can have enormous political significance.

For the international community, the opportunity to assist carries with it a great responsibility. And that, in essence, is the spirit of today's initiative -- to ensure that election observers are always making a positive contribution.

The Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, and its accompanying Code of Conduct, marks an important step forward.

Among the many sensible guidelines it establishes is agreement by organizations sending observers that they will act with total impartiality. They agree also to examine all of the relevant stages of the elections, and not simply parachute in on the day of the vote.

They commit to take no funding from host governments whose elections they are observing, and to insist on freedom of movement and full access to information throughout the many stages of the election.

Organizations also undertake carefully to select and train members of the observation team, ensuring that they have no political bias that might affect their judgment. Each and every observer is asked to adhere to a Code of Conduct.

The declaration is also very explicit in committing organizations never to send an election observation mission to a country if its presence would be misinterpreted as giving legitimacy to an election that clearly is not democratic.

The community of organizations providing international election observers has grown and diversified over the years. Until now, however, there has been no set of commonly held standards governing this important work.

Now we do -- and we must make full use of them. We should also make it a priority to strengthen local civil society groups to play the role of electoral watchdogs within their own national arenas. Our ultimate goal therefore should be to work ourselves out of a job. But until that is possible, let us live up to these guidelines. I am very glad, on behalf of the UN Secretariat, to endorse them, and to pledge to follow them fully in our work.

Thank you very much.