

Political Parties Gather for Summit on Political Violence

Expressing a growing alarm over the rise in assassinations and violent disputes between parties, political, religious and civic leaders gathered in Abuja on March 19 for a one-day Peace Summit on combating political violence. The conference featured addresses by President Olusegun Obasanjo, Independent National Electoral Commission Chairman Abel Guobadia, and the Inspector General of Police Tafa Balogun. Most of the political party national chairmen and some gubernatorial candidates participated in the conference as well.

President Obasanjo stated that any politician found to be involved in violence should be disqualified from playing any role in Nigeria's political process.

The Inspector General indicated that police preparedness was high with training of the 250,000-strong police force intensified. The police have procured 1500 additional vehicles in preparation for the elections.

For his part, Guobadia told the assembly, "the electoral process is about to be swallowed by fear, intimidation and harassment." He challenged the parties to exert greater control over their members.

INEC Issues Conflicting Reports on Candidate Disqualifications

On March 16, INEC released a provisional list of presidential candidates that suggested five of the 20 aspirants had been eliminated from the race. The next day, however, INEC Chairman Guobadia stated that the Commission had not

disqualified any candidate. At week's end, the final list of candidates remained unclear and INEC again pushed back the deadline for modifications, this time to March 24.

Also up in the air was the disqualification of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) governor of Delta State, James Ibori, pending the outcome of a suit challenging his ineligibility on grounds of a previous criminal conviction. Ibori filed a lawsuit in federal court to compel INEC to include his name on the candidate list.

In Anambra State, where the governor and several members of the PDP executive board recently defected to the Alliance for Democracy (AD), candidate lists seemed remarkably similar. In perhaps a sign of the agreement recently brokered between the two parties to control electoral violence, twelve candidates appeared on both party lists. The provisional lists even show one candidate contesting one National Assembly seat as an AD candidate, and another seat as a PDP candidate.

Ijaw Youths Threaten to Obstruct April Elections

Fresh fighting between youth of the Ijaw and Itsekiri ethnic groups has forced oil companies to curtail operations and evacuate their staff from oil fields south of Warri in Delta State and may affect the April elections. Motivated by a perceived lack of response to their calls for new local government boundaries that would give them representation in the local government, Ijaw youth have vowed to impede elections in the area. The long-running dispute between the Ijaws and the Itsekiris caused

the military to intervene to restore order and has led to deaths on all sides including soldiers and oil workers. This latest outbreak of violence follows an eruption of hostilities and arson in January and February in the aftermath of a contentious PDP primary.

INEC Publishes Political Party Code of Conduct

On March 18, INEC released a political party code of conduct signed by nine of the 30 political parties. At the March 19 Peace Summit, additional parties agreed to abide by the code but not all parties have yet signed on, including the PDP. The code calls on all parties to abide by the laws and electoral regulations, and prohibits the use of inflammatory language, the incitement of violence, and the monopolization of state media and resources for the advantage of any political party.

Buhari Shuns Presidential Debate

After several days of conflicting statements from his campaign and party, All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari decided not to participate in a presidential debate with President Obasanjo scheduled for March 21. Presidential Obasanjo appeared alone in the last of a series of debates that featured 17 of the 20 candidates and was organized by the Broadcasting Organisation of Nigeria. Buhari's campaign cited the lack of an official letter of invitation as the reason the candidate did not participate, though his spokesman confirmed that Buhari would appear in a March 27 debate sponsored by the Voice of America.

The debates provided equal time to all candidates who appeared. Candidates responded to questions from a small panel and stuck to issues of concern. Each candidate articulated what they feel is wrong with Nigeria, and outlined their vision for the country.

Recent Reports of Violence

- A clash between PDP and AD supporters in the Oshodi area of Lagos state left seven people dead.
- The convoy of PDP vice presidential candidate Atiku Abubakar was stoned by irate youths in Kaduna.
- Approximately 200 houses were destroyed following a clash between PDP and ANPP supporters in two towns in Kebbi State.
- The chairman of the PDP in Yamaltu/Deba Local Government Area of Gombe State was murdered on March 17 by a group of unknown gunmen.
- Supporters of Kwara State ANPP Governor Mohammed Lawal and PDP gubernatorial candidate Bukola Saraki clashed over the weekend of March 21-22, leaving three dead and markets closed in the state capital Ilorin
- In Zamfara State, police have warned religious leaders to steer clear of politics in their sermons, fearing that their political involvement could trigger hostilities. The inter-party consultative forum decided to suspend political rallies in the state.

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