

LIBERIA: Misinformed voters demand payment for registration

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The first day of voter registration in Monrovia

GBARNGA, 10 May 2005 (IRIN) - Misinformed villagers in central Liberia, long accustomed to gifts from power-hungry politicians, have been demanding payment from government officials in return for putting their names on the voters' list for general elections due in October, a local official told IRIN.

Some rural folk were so confused by the electoral process that they thought political campaigning had begun already and were demanding cash payments to register for their voter's card, Daniel Weetol, the Superintendent of Bong County, told IRIN.

The phenomenon was quite widespread in Bong County, he added.

"I personally have been moving around and even walking long distances – sometimes four or five hours from one village to another – repeatedly informing our people to stop asking for money before they register," said Weetol, who is based in Gbarnga, 200 km northeast of the capital Monrovia.

Gbarnga, the administrative headquarters town of Bong County, was a key stronghold for former president Charles Taylor who regularly gave out gifts of sacks of rice to garner support from the impoverished locals.

According to Weetol, most of the current confusion could be resolved if there was a better information campaign explaining the voter registration process.

"The major problem we are facing in Bong is there is not sufficient information reaching out to the people in the remote villages about the importance of the voter registration and the entire elections process," he said.

The National Electoral Commission (NEC) began voter registration on the 25 April. The process is due to end for most Liberians on 21 May.

However, refugees returning to Liberia after 14 years of civil war will be able to register as late as 4 June.

To date, only 650,000 voters out of a targeted 1.5 million have been registered,

according to NEC co-chairman James Fromoyan.

The electoral commission said in a statement last week that only 1,039 of the 1,511 planned voter registration centres had been opened.

A shortage of vehicles and communication facilities was slowing the process, said Bong County election magistrate George Gbarkolay.

"As for me, I only have a motorbike. I should have a car that could take me as fast as possible to any village and town if there is a problem," he told IRIN.

"But all of our teams now rely on lifts from UNMIL (United Nations Mission in Liberia) vehicles to be able to get from one point to another," he said.

Other parts of the West African country are encountering similar problems.

Last week the NEC said it's enumerators were unable to reach voters in several remote areas of southeastern and northern Liberia due to the poor state of the roads.

"Our field staff could not reach some of the centres in Grand Gedeh, Grand Kru [in the south east] and Lofa [in the north].... Because the roads there are very bad," said Gbarkolay.

"In some parts, like the deep forest parts of Lofa - not even a chopper can land!" he said.

To further complicate matters, some Guineans have been caught trying to register to vote, passing themselves off as Liberians.

"Our officers were swift in arresting those individuals and in fact, during the preliminary investigations six arrested persons were found to have Guinean national identity cards in their possession," an immigration official in Gbarnga told IRIN.

"We immediately ceased their Liberian voter registration cards and sent them back to Guinea," he said.

In Ganta, close to the Guinean border, youth leaders were adamant that checks had been carried out fully there.

"We have rejected those who could not show a single proof of Liberian nationality... this is a purely Liberian process," Samuel Paye, told IRIN.

Under the country's election laws, anyone who is suspected of not being a Liberian must present either a Liberian passport or birth certificate.

But in the wake of the 1989-2003 civil war, that displaced hundreds of thousands of people many Liberians have neither.

In such cases, a chief or village elder can be called upon to identify an individual and provide confirmation of citizenship.