

ETHIOPIA: EU defends observer chief against allegations of favouritism



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EU elections chief observer, Ana Gomes.

ADDIS ABABA, 24 Aug 2005 (IRIN) - The European Union (EU) has defended its chief election observer, Ana Gomes, against accusations in the Ethiopian state media that she favoured opposition parties.

In a statement released on Monday, the EU also backed the head of the European Commission in Ethiopia, Tim Clarke, who was also criticised in the article.

The article, which appeared in the state daily, The Ethiopian Herald, and on the pro-government Walta Information Centre website, accused both Gomes and Clarke of becoming close to opposition leaders in the country.

Gomes, a member of the European parliament, was critical of aspects of the electoral process during the campaign, while Clarke played a leading role in trying to bring together opposition leaders and the ruling party to break the deadlock over allegations of fraud.

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front won 296 seats in the 547-member parliament in national elections on 15 May that were marred by violence and widespread allegations of electoral malpractice.

A joint statement by European Commissioner Louis Michel, who heads development and humanitarian aid, and Benita Ferrero-Waldner, who heads external relations and European neighbourhood policy, expressed "deep surprise and concern" over the article.

"Allegations made in the article are completely without foundation and are totally unacceptable," the statement read.

"Both Ms Gomes and Mr Clarke are people of integrity who have played a very important role in their respective mandates throughout this difficult election process," it added. "They continue to have our full support."

The EU mission, which started work in Ethiopia in March, is expected to publish its report on the elections in September. Diplomats told IRIN the report would "pull no punches".

A separate report on the Somali elections held on Sunday is due to be released later this week. International observers told IRIN the Somali vote had been tarnished by irregularities, including more than one person at a time in voting booths.

Meanwhile, the vice chairman of the main opposition party, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), Berhanu Nega, has been appointed the 17th mayor of the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, after his party took 20 out of the city's 23 seats.

The CUD said its priorities would be to cut the 40 percent unemployment levels in the capital and to loosen state control of media outlets in the city.

"We have a very tough five years ahead of us," Berhanu said after his appointment.

The electoral board said the CUD won 109 seats while the second largest opposition party, the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces, won 52 seats in the national parliament. Opposition parties held just 12 seats during the last parliament.

Results from re-runs in 31 disputed constituencies and from the elections in Somali region are expected on 5 September.

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