



NEWS RELEASE

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POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT FORCES NDI TO WITHDRAW GAMBIA-BASED PROGRAM STAFF

WASHINGTON, DC., JANUARY 20, 1996 -- The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) has withdrawn its Banjul-based staff that was conducting programs in support of The Gambia's transition to democratic rule. The NDI decision was made as a result of political developments in The Gambia that raise concerns about the integrity of the transition process and prospects for meaningful elections in July of this year. NDI is also withdrawing the field staff because of recently imposed requirements that the Institute work exclusively through government agencies under the direction of the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC).

Following the July 1994 coup, the AFPRC announced a 20-month transition timetable leading up to multiparty elections in July 1996. Certain benchmarks were established by the AFPRC such as drafting a new constitution and electoral law, lifting a ban on political parties, redrawing electoral boundaries and establishing an independent electoral committee. Since opening a field office in Banjul in August 1995, NDI provided technical assistance to the Constitutional Review Commission, the Electoral Law Review Committee and to civic organizations.

NDI expressed concern about a number of issues that could affect negatively the legitimacy and credibility of the democratic transition process in The Gambia. These include the delay of the AFPRC in releasing the draft constitution and electoral law for public comment, the continued ban on political activity, the partisanship of individuals appointed by the government to carry out civic education programs, increased harassment of journalists and new restrictions on civil liberties, such as the promulgation of Decree 57 which allows the Minister of Interior to detain individuals for up to 90 days without probable cause. These developments continue to add to an atmosphere that hinders the ability of Gambians to participate fully and freely in the civic and political life of the country during this critical period.

NDI will continue to look for ways to assist The Gambia and, if conditions permit, would consider reopening its Banjul office.

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