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Benin Hosts African Conference on Constitution Building

Africa will take an important step forward next week (**25-27 November**) in its ambition to establish good governance across the continent. Hosted by the Government of Benin, the African Union (AU) Commission is organizing an international conference together with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). The Guest of Honour will be Minister of Foreign Affairs of Benin Jean-Marie Ehouzou.

This is the first stage in a five year activity plan agreed this year by the AU and International IDEA to strengthen the workings of democracy in Africa. It is based on the *African Charter for Democracy, Elections and Governance* adopted by the AU in 2007 and sets an agenda for moving the continent on a new path to constitutional development based on shared values and principles.

“We are determined to make sure the democratic gains that have been made in Africa are secured and deepened,” says Julia Dolly Joiner, Commissioner for Political Affairs of the African Union Commission. “We plan to spend 15 million euros over the next five years to support countries building democratic governance in keeping with local conditions.”

During the three-day conference participants from AU Member States, civil society and academia will discuss issues including challenges in developing constitutional government in Africa. Delegates from the global south will also attend to share experiences and deepen South-South relationship. They will discuss the challenges facing them with fellow Africans and representatives from other countries in the global south and north.

One of the legacies of the colonial era is the lack of 'internalisation' of constitutions, the problem of countries reconnecting and institutionalizing modern concepts of democracy with traditional methods of governance destroyed by previous colonial powers. The conference is an opportunity for delegates to explore ways of addressing current issues in a specifically African context.

The AU and International IDEA have identified challenges to democratic development such as insufficient funding of political processes, and manipulation of constitutions by political elites. While focusing on improving governance systems throughout Africa, they believe other countries could also learn from the African experiences, for example from the resurgence of public participation in the democratic processes.

Vidar Helgesen, Secretary-General of International IDEA, comments: "The activity plan is designed to respond to the challenges facing democracy across the continent, making democracy work better for development, peace and security through strengthening political institutions and processes."

More than 150 delegates are expected to attend the conference, which takes place in Cotonou, Benin – the city that gave its name to the 1975 agreement replacing the Lomé Convention on trade, which introduced the idea of 'good governance' as an essential ingredient of cooperation on development.

The conference is financed by GTZ, with support from IDRC (Canada) and the Government of Norway.

Ends.

Note to Editors

Journalists are invited to cover the event.

The African Conference on Constitution Building takes place in Cotonou (**Palais des Congrès - Blue Hall**), Republic of Benin, 25-27 November 2008.

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