

US warns candidates on election violence

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KAMPALA. With the February 18 polling day fast-approaching, the United States government has issued a warning to all Uganda's presidential candidates to "refrain" from any provocative rhetoric that might plunge the country into anarchy.

In the statement issued yesterday, a spokesperson at the State Department, Mr Mark Toner, said the US also supports calls by Ugandans—notably the thousands of youth—for a peaceful, transparent and credible electoral process, before, during, and after the voting.

"Violence or threats of violence from any group or individual are unacceptable, and those who participate in such acts – regardless of which candidate they support – must be held accountable," Mr Toner stated.

"We call on all parties to refrain from provocative actions or rhetoric that raise tensions and that seek to divide Ugandans rather than bring them together," he added.

The US statement comes against a backdrop of counter-accusations from both the government and the Opposition that there are undeclared schemes by either side to cause chaos if the final outcome of the election does not go their way.

The police has recruited crime preventers ostensibly to beef up security during and after elections. However, critics and the Opposition have branded crime preventers a disguised partisan militia force for the ruling NRM party.

Last week, there was heavy deployment of the military and regular police in Kampala, sparking fears of impending chaos.

But police and the army have allayed fears about the possibility of anarchy, saying everything is under control in the tight race between President Museveni, the incumbent seeking a fifth re-election, Opposition FDC presidential flag bearer Dr Kizza Besigye and former prime minister Amama Mbabazi.

The other candidates in the race are Maj Gen Benon Biraaro, Dr Abed Bwanika, Prof

Venansius Baryamureeba, Mr Joseph Mubirizi and Ms Maureen Kyalya.

The US government also strongly urged the "government and electoral authorities" to ensure a level playing field and transparent process through fair application of the law to accord all candidates equal opportunity to express their views and voters have the opportunity to hear them.

"We look to the representatives of all parties and their supporters, as well as members of the security forces and the crime preventers, to support the peaceful and fair conduct of polls free from intimidation."

"Uganda's progress depends on adherence to democratic principles and processes. The US stands by the Ugandan people as they undertake this most essential democratic endeavour."

Mr Ofwono Opondo, the government spokesperson and executive director of the Uganda Media Centre, responded saying Uganda does not need advice from anyone, especially on how to run elections.

"Our position is very clear that elections must be free, fair and transparent," Mr Opondo said in a telephone interview. "In the event that there are disputes, we already have legal and judicial mechanisms that enable the resolution of disputes and in case of anything else, we also have the capacity to handle every situation."

The FDC coordinator for external relations Sam Makhoha claimed it is the NRM and their candidate who have been issuing threats here and there. "So I think that advisory speaks more to them than us," he said.

A spokesperson for the Go-Forward camp, Ms Maggie Lukowe, said they strongly support the US call for peace as has been advocated before by all other stakeholders.

"Our campaign is more about peaceful transition, which this country has never experienced. On the other hand, as everyone knows, it has been NRM threatening war and not to hand over power, so that message speaks more to them," she said.