



**Interim Statement of the Commonwealth Observer Group
Nigeria Presidential and National Assembly Elections
23 February 2019**

**Statement by HE Dr Jakaya Kikwete
Former President of the United Republic of Tanzania
Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group**

INTRODUCTION

The people of Nigeria, members of the media, fellow observers, members of the diplomatic corps, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for coming to this Commonwealth Observer Group Press Conference.

This is an interim statement, made while the electoral process is yet to be concluded, and as such provides an initial assessment as we observed it. The final report, setting out our full findings on the entire process and our recommendations in greater detail, will be submitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General.

BACKGROUND

The Commonwealth Observer Group was constituted by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, the Rt. Hon. Patricia Scotland QC, following an invitation from the Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Professor Mahmood Yakubu, to observe the General Elections scheduled for 16 February 2019. This is the sixth election that the Commonwealth has been invited to observe in Nigeria since 1999.

Nigeria, a key member of the Commonwealth, is the largest democracy in Africa with 84 million registered voters. Organising elections across 36 States and the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja with almost 120 000 polling units is a very significant undertaking.

The political environment is highly charged and there are security concerns in some parts of the country. Several cases of election related violence have been reported. We welcome the signing of the National Peace Accord by political parties shortly before the elections, which was witnessed by the Commonwealth Secretary-General.

We deployed advance observers on 29 January 2019, ahead of the full Observer Group which arrived on 8 February 2019. The Group had briefings from key Nigerian stakeholders including INEC, the Police, political party representatives, the National Human Rights Commission, civil society organisations, youth representatives, media and citizen observers. The Group also held meetings with other regional and international observer missions as well as Commonwealth High Commissioners.

The Group deployed across Nigeria from 13 February 2019, covering Benin City, Enugu, Ibadan, Jos, Kaduna, Kano, Lagos, Port Harcourt and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja. Observers met with election officials, police, civil society groups, party officials and media, among others. We also met with other national, regional and international observers, to build a comprehensive picture of the conduct of the process. We also observed INEC preparations for the distribution of sensitive and non-sensitive materials.

INEC had provided public assurances of its preparedness and readiness to conduct the elections as scheduled, including recruitment and training of polling staff, distribution of materials and other logistics. However, in the early hours of 16 February 2019, the Chairman of INEC announced the postponement of the elections to 23 February 2019. Observers were therefore recalled to Abuja.

The Commonwealth Observer Group and other international observer missions including, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), African Union (AU), European Union (EU), National Democratic Institute (NDI)/International Republican Institute (IRI) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation issued a Joint Statement on 16 February, calling on all Nigerians to remain calm and supportive of the electoral process as INEC sought to implement the new timeline.

We subsequently redeployed on 21 February 2019 to prepare for Election Day. On 23 February, Observers visited polling units to observe the opening, accreditation, voting, counting and collation. Observers returned to Abuja for de-briefing and preparation of our final report.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

These are the initial observations of the Commonwealth Observer Group:

1. Notwithstanding further assurances provided by INEC, there were delays in the distribution of materials, resulting in late opening of polling units. Although INEC subsequently authorised extended voting hours for those polling units that had opened late, this information was not communicated effectively and not followed by all polling staff.
2. We noted that polling officials, security staff and other essential workers were unable to vote and were therefore disenfranchised. In addition, we were told that 11.2 million Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) were not collected; consequently, over 13 percent of all registered voters could not vote.
3. We observed problems with the Smart Card Readers (SCRs) in a number of polling units. This caused further delays as polling officials awaited technical assistance or replacements.
4. The Group was impressed by the hard work and dedication of polling staff. Observers noted however, that many would have benefitted from more comprehensive training in polling procedures. For example, in some places, the layout of polling units, including the positioning of voting booths, potentially compromised the secrecy of the ballot. Incorrect labelling and failure to seal the ballot boxes correctly were also noted. Lack of signage within polling units caused some confusion.

5. We witnessed crowding within a number of polling units with large numbers of party agents, many of whom were not wearing INEC accreditation badges. Some party agents attempted to intimidate polling staff and voters, including during counting.
6. During sorting and counting, the determination of invalid votes was often vigorously contested by party agents and members of the public, partly due to a lack of understanding as to what constituted an invalid vote.
7. We acknowledge the important role played by police, together with other security agencies, in securing polling units.
8. This was a highly contested election. There was a significant increase in the number of political parties and presidential candidates although in practice the campaign was dominated by the two major parties. Whilst the environment was tense and divisive, overall, fundamental freedoms of association, expression, assembly and movement were generally respected.
9. We noted some progress in increasing women's political participation as candidates in the 2019 elections and encourage the Government and all political parties to take stronger action to promote genuine inclusion.
10. We welcome the passing of the Not Too Young To Run Act (2018) as a significant first step to enabling youth participation in all elective offices. We hope additional ways will be found to enable more young people to participate effectively in future elections as candidates and voters. We commend the youth of Nigeria, especially the National Youth Service Corps, for their invaluable contribution to the electoral process.
11. The Group welcomed the role played by the media (print, broadcast, online) in covering the elections. However, some challenges were reported to the observers including the safety of journalists, fake news and the issue of hate speech on social media.

CONCLUSION

Our initial conclusions therefore are as follows:

1. Electoral reform is a continuous process building on what has worked successfully and addressing weaknesses. However, there have been considerable organisational, logistical and technical difficulties in these elections, which we know INEC and all stakeholders will wish to address.
2. Election related violence and loss of life, which occurred in a number of places, is deeply troubling. Nigeria can do better. Violence has no place in a modern democracy. Those responsible should be held accountable. We encourage all political parties to honour their commitments in the National Peace Accord and reject violence.
3. Notwithstanding the difficulties and challenges surrounding these elections, for the most part Nigerians had the opportunity to express their will and exercise their

franchise. We trust that the final stages of collation and announcement of results will be handled in a transparent and credible manner.

4. The people of Nigeria have demonstrated patience and commitment to their democracy. We appeal to them to maintain the same commitment in the post-election period, and as Nigeria prepares to return to the polls on 9 March 2019 for the Governorship, State Assembly and Federal Capital Territory (FCT) area council elections.
5. The Commonwealth Observer Group's Final Report will contain our recommendations which we hope will be helpful to INEC and other stakeholders in strengthening Nigeria's democracy.

Abuja, 25 February 2019

For more information, or to organise media interviews, please contact:

Josephine Latu-Sanft, Senior Communications Officer

Tel: +44 20 7747 6476 Mob (Nigeria): +234 (0)9039065536 Twitter @commonwealthsec

Email: j.latu-sanft@commonwealth.int

Note to Editors

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 53 independent and equal sovereign states. It is home to 2.4 billion citizens, of whom 60 per cent are under the age of 30. The Commonwealth includes some of the world's largest, smallest, richest and poorest countries, spanning five regions. 31 of its members are small states, many of them island nations. Commonwealth countries are supported by an active network of more than 80 intergovernmental, civil society, cultural and professional organisations.

Visit www.thecommonwealth.org