



COMMONWEALTH OBSERVER GROUP

Sierra Leone Presidential and Parliamentary Elections

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News Release

**INTERIM STATEMENT BY DR THE HON KENNY D. ANTHONY,
CHAIRPERSON, COMMONWEALTH OBSERVER GROUP
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In my arrival statement delivered on 4 August, I indicated our intention of the Commonwealth Observer Group (COG) to deploy to various parts of the country. This was done. Our observers were stationed in five major cities and towns. They established contacts, watched campaigns and exchanged views with the local branches of the National Electoral Commission (NEC), local party officials, local and other international observers and the citizens of Sierra Leone.

On Election Day, we observed the opening of the polls and witnessed the polling process in as many stations as possible. We watched the closing of the polls, the counting process and the post counting exercise in several polling stations.

The Commonwealth Observer Group salutes the people of Sierra Leone for their passion for peace and stability and their strong belief in and commitment to the principles of democracy and the democratic process. These are among the fundamental values of the Commonwealth family.

We were pleased to observe that in most places long queues of enthusiastic but disciplined voters had assembled at polling stations hours before the polling stations were opened. Except for understandable displays of irritation at the delay in the commencement of polls, the voters behaved in a peaceful and orderly manner. The 'no violence' campaign mounted by various groups clearly achieved its objectives. There was zero tolerance of any tendency towards violence and fraud at the polls.

The general commendation of the NEC for its professional competence, fairness, efficiency, effectiveness and transparency by all the major political parties was reinforced by the performance of the electoral officials. The delays which occurred in many centres at the beginning of the polls were unfortunate but understandable. They were mainly due to the late arrival of polling materials, sometimes because of security considerations. The insistence of polling officials on total compliance with laid down procedures and the determination to achieve maximum transparency also contributed to the delays.

After the initial hiccup, voting progressed well. The polling register was generally satisfactory but the lack of clarity about its ordering slowed down the process. Incidents of individuals who did not find their names on the voter register were few and in most cases solutions were found. Arrangements made to deal with cases of people losing their voter cards could have been better.

The lay out of the polling stations was satisfactory and the secrecy of the ballot was assured. In very few cases, security was not provided but in most other places police officials were visible and helpful but not intrusive. Police officials in collaboration with the polling agents, assisted the elderly, the illiterate and those who were physically challenged.

The atmosphere at the polling stations was, in some instances animated but generally orderly. We did not notice any organized attempt to defraud the voting process or to intimidate voters. The party agents by and large expressed satisfaction with the conduct of the polls.

The counting process followed the laid down procedure. Party agents were made to observe the exercise and co-operated with NEC officials. In cases where objections were raised, they were quickly addressed and a solution obtained either through consensus or the intervention of the senior NEC official on the scene.

On the basis of the above, we are inclined to believe that the conditions were such as to enable the people of Sierra Leone to express their will freely and in accordance with internationally accepted standards.

Although we observed the counting, we were not in a position to observe the post counting and collation exercise. We are informed that the official results will be announced in the near future. The timely release of results inspires confidence. If the professional competence, honesty, integrity and transparency which have characterized the exercise so far are carried through the collating process to the formal announcement of the final results, we believe that the credibility of the elections would be enhanced.

The entire process of a Presidential and Parliamentary election cannot be perfect. There will always be areas begging for improvement. This will form part of our full report which we will begin to compile as soon as our observers return from their stations today. We shall complete the report before we depart Sierra Leone exactly a week from today and submit it to the Secretary General of the Commonwealth for further action.

Once again, the Commonwealth Observer Group commends the people of Sierra Leone for their commitment to and support of democracy, with a successful transition from one civilian regime to the other.

It is for the people of Sierra Leone and their friends in the international community to nourish the democratic will and aspirations so evident in these elections.

The Commonwealth stands ready to continue its contribution to the post-conflict reconstruction process in Sierra Leone. It calls on like minded international organizations to do the same