



Commonwealth Observer Group

Uganda Presidential and Parliamentary Elections
February 2006

News Release

INTERIM STATEMENT

The following statement was issued this afternoon by the Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group, HE Sir Ketumile Masire:

"The results process is still continuing, so it is too soon to make an assessment of the entire voting and results phase. Nevertheless, I do not want this historic moment – the first multi-party elections in 26 years – to pass without a statement from the Commonwealth Observer Group.

Our Group deployed ten two-person teams on 23 February to observe the voting phase of Uganda's Presidential and Parliamentary Elections. There were three teams in Kampala and one each in Gulu, Lira, Mbale, Jinja, Mbarara, Kabale and Hoima, each with an interpreter. Together our teams sought to obtain a representative sample of the process, to enable us to arrive at a broad overview.

We were present for the opening of the polling stations and then observed throughout the day at as many others as possible, ending with the counting of the votes. We then tracked the polling station results from the counts through to the district centres, to determine whether they were transmitted accurately. In Kampala our teams have been - and are still - present at the national results centre to observe the final stages of the process.

There were some shortcomings on voting day. Many stations opened late. Voters did not always know what to do, reflecting deficiencies in voter education. To a large extent, the party agents were too far away to observe the checking of the register and identity documents properly. Rain disrupted the process badly in some places and there was inadequate alternative provision. Poor lighting, rain and power cuts made the counting process difficult in many places. Most seriously, a significant number of names were missing from the register and seals were often not correctly applied - in several places they were not used at all.

On the positive side, we were pleased to find that despite the atmosphere of tension prior to the poll almost everywhere the day itself was peaceful: we congratulate everyone on that. So far as the process was concerned, the voters appeared to us to be free to vote as they wished; most election staff were diligent and committed; security was effective but generally low-key; party agents and domestic observers were present. We came across no cases of intimidation at the polling stations. Only a few serious irregularities were reported to us. At this point we have not come across any large-scale or systematic attempts to manipulate the voting process. The counting of votes at the polling stations was transparent and generally properly conducted.

We congratulate the people for their determination to exercise their democratic rights. We believe that, in general, the Electoral Commission's arrangements on the day reflect their commitment to transparent election management.

Now our teams will observe the rest of the results process, so that we can see if that phase as a whole has been conducted properly and whether the results of the elections reflect the wishes of the people. Because we await the completion of that key part of our observation we are not yet able to give our overall assessment on the poll, count and results process. We may therefore issue a further statement after our Teams return to Kampala on 27 February.

We will then consider our final report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General. We will need to take into account not only our direct observations of the polling and the results process but also the electoral environment as a whole. As we said in our Arrival Statement, that means the legal framework, the voter registration process, civic and voter education, the fairness of media coverage and the campaign. We will also need to consider the impact of action in the courts and the violence in the days immediately prior to the poll. As our Terms of Reference say, we need to consider "all the various factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process". Having completed our report we will leave Uganda on 3 March.

In the meantime I want to pay tribute to those who have worked so hard for democracy in Uganda and whose efforts I hope will come to fruition in a peaceful transition to multi-party politics in the days to come. I urge all Ugandans to continue to be calm and to conduct the rest of the process in the conditions of peace which prevailed on 23 February".

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