

INTERIM STATEMENT BY RATU EPELI NAILATIKAU
Chairperson
Commonwealth Observer Group
29 August 2006

"The Commonwealth Observer Group has had a presence on the ground in Guyana for almost three months, because although the main Group arrived only a week ago we were preceded by a Long-Term Observer and an Advance Team.

During those three months violence and the fear of violence has increased; fortunately, however, the week prior to Election Day was relatively peaceful. The media has not always been balanced in its reporting, yet the media's adherence to the Code of Conduct improved as time went on. Despite some incidents of 'hate-speech' the political parties were generally able to campaign freely.

On Election Day itself, our eight Teams were present for the opening of polling stations in six districts. They then visited as many other stations as possible, observed the counting of the votes and tracked the polling station results through to the Returning Officer, to determine whether the results were transmitted accurately. In Georgetown our observers have been present at GECOM's national results centre to observe the final stages of the process.

There were some problems during the voting. Two political parties and the domestic observers of EAB complained that some of their agents and observers had been denied access to polling stations. Even though they had duly registered, a number of voters had to go from polling station to polling station before they could find their names on the voters list. In some stations copies of the voters list were not available for agents. Some voters had to wait for several hours before they could vote. Facilities for those with disabilities were sometimes poor. Fingers were not always checked for indelible ink, and there were other variations in procedure. We noted that some campaign messages continued to be broadcast on television, a major breach of the media Code of Conduct. Some polling stations were very small and cramped.

Generally, however, our observations of the voting phase were positive. We are aware of the disagreements between the parties concerning voter registration, which had dominated the years prior to the elections. On the day it seemed to us that the register was reasonably reliable. Where we were present, the voting took place in secret and in conditions of calm, and there were few security problems. Most voters were able to find their names on the list of electors and appeared to understand the voting system. Generally, stations opened on time and had the necessary staff and materials. In most cases, procedures were properly followed, the stations were well organised, the atmosphere was good and the staff were well-trained, helpful and efficient. We were pleased to see that large numbers of women voted. Where we were present the vast majority

of voters expressed themselves satisfied with the way in which the voting had been managed.

Our teams found that the count at the polling stations was thorough and transparent. The polling station results our Observers tracked were transmitted accurately to the Returning Officer. To this point the results process has gone well.

The Commonwealth Observer Group is not yet in a position to evaluate the entire process, because that process is not yet complete. We will do that in our report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, which we will write and sign in Georgetown before we depart on 5 September. We hope to be able to provide some key points of our assessment in a further statement before we leave. However, with so much of the process completed, we believe that we should also express an interim view now.

Our interim view is that, so far, the process has gone well. While there have been shortcomings, these have not been such as to undermine the overall integrity and credibility of the exercise. For the future there will need to be a fundamental re-think in some areas – not least, the way in which the Elections Commission itself is constituted. For the present we congratulate the voters and GECOM on the effort they have put in and wish them well for the remainder of the process.

If any of the parties feel aggrieved and wish to challenge the results they should follow the procedures laid down in law.

In conclusion, I appeal to all the people of this country to continue to be calm and to allow the process to be completed in conditions of peace, so that Guyana can go forward”.

12.00 noon
Tuesday, 29 August 2006

Note to Editors

The Commonwealth Observer Group, consisting of 18 eminent persons and support staff, has been in Guyana since 22 August. On Friday 25 August the members of the Group deployed to their base locations around the country. The Commonwealth's two-person teams met electors and observed the end of the campaign, the final preparations for election day and the poll, count and results process in six of the ten Districts, covering the areas where most of the electors live. Three of our eight two-person Teams were based in District Four, while there was one each in Districts Two, Three, Six, Nine and Ten. Though based in Georgetown the Chairperson of the Group personally visited three other Districts.

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