

STATEMENT ON THE VOTING IN FIJI ISLANDS

**Mr K D Knight QC MP
Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group**

**"We are struck not so much by what went wrong
during the voting but by how much went right"**

Mr K D Knight, Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group, issued the following statement in the Fiji Islands on behalf of the Group on 14 May 2006:

"The Commonwealth Observer Group is not yet in a position to assess the credibility of the General Election process as a whole, not least because a key part of that process - the counting and results phase - has yet to begin. This statement therefore concerns only the voting phase, which came to an end on Saturday 13 May. We will make a further short statement – including our views on the counting - later in the week. After that we will write our full report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, which we will sign here before we depart.

Throughout the voting, and again since the end of polling on Saturday, I have been in touch with the Commonwealth Observer Group's teams based in Suva, Nadi and Labasa. They have travelled widely and co-operated with the observers from the University of the South Pacific and the other international observers from the European Union and the Pacific Islands Forum. As a result I believe they now have a good idea of what went on during the voting process.

I too feel that I have seen enough to comment on the voting phase. I was able to meet voters and see voting first-hand in all four Divisions. I was based in Suva and from the capital, was able to travel widely in the Central Division, to both urban and rural polling stations, across the Division. I also travelled to the Western, Northern and Eastern Divisions and saw voting and spoke to voters there too – from Nadi to Labasa to the villages of Kadavu.

It is clear from the Commonwealth Observer Group's observations that there were some shortcomings in the voting arrangements: there were some problems with the register, and there were also some logistical problems on the first day, when ballot papers were delivered late to many stations causing them to open late. We do not dismiss either point and we will have more to say about both when we come to write our full report.

The adequacy of the register has already attracted considerable attention. For every voter who registered but whose name did not appear in the final register, that represented a breach of the individual's rights. We greatly regret that and hope that serious efforts will be made to ensure that such problems do not occur next time. We will be making some recommendations in our report which we hope will help. The confusion concerning where to vote and how to find out about this was apparent and needs to be addressed for the future. The postal ballot process also attracted our attention, especially in regard to overnight storage.

However, we do not believe that these and other shortcomings resulted from a systematic effort to 'fix' the process; and, based on our observations, they were not on a sufficient scale or of a nature to undermine the overall credibility of the voting phase of this election. According to our observations, the overwhelming majority of electors were able to enjoy that key democratic freedom – the freedom of the individual to vote as he or she wishes – in a process which, while not perfect, was reasonably well managed.

Given the short time available to prepare for these elections, the voting process went much better than might reasonably have been expected: we were struck not so much by what went wrong during the voting but by how much went right. The secrecy of the ballot was assured. Generally procedures were properly followed. There were relatively few serious irregularities. In our view, the Elections Office did well in the time available and given the difficulties with which they were confronted.

I also want to comment on the voters, the polling station officials, the police and the contestants. We were impressed by the voters: they were peaceful and patient, but determined to exercise their constitutional right and duty and thereby to play their part in upholding this country's democracy. The polling station staff were efficient and helpful to voters. We especially admire their dedication, discipline, and good humour despite very long hours in often difficult circumstances. The police were present at all the stations we visited and appear to us to have been successful - not only by upholding the law and providing the necessary security for the voting but by doing so with a combination of competence and lightness of touch. The conduct of the contestants – the candidates and the political parties – was generally responsible. However, we observed that the political parties did not always provide agents at polling centres, even though they had the right to do so. For instance, they were conspicuous by their absence during the voting at postal ballot centres. This caused us some surprise.

Attention now turns to the counting and the results phase. That phase is as important for the overall credibility of the process as the voting period which has just come to an end. Our Teams will be present at all four counting centres for the verification and the count itself: once again, we will be watching. When the counting is over we will make a further statement. As I said when we began, the people of this country can be assured that we will 'say it as we see it'."

ENDS

Suva, 14 May 2006

FURTHER INFORMATION: Christopher Child on (679) 940 2531