

Introduction

Invitation

On 7 June 2001 the Caretaker Government of Fiji Islands invited the Commonwealth Secretary-General to establish a Commonwealth Observer Group for the 2001 General Election. Observers were also invited from the United Nations and the European Union.

In line with established practice the Secretary-General decided to send an Assessment Mission to Fiji, with two objectives: to determine whether the political parties and others would welcome the presence of Commonwealth Observers, and to ensure that the observers would have free and open access to polling stations and counting centres and be free generally to pursue their mandate.

The Assessment Mission visited Fiji Islands from 12 to 15 July 2001 and concluded that there was broad support for the presence of such a Group and that the Group would be able to pursue its mandate. The Secretary-General subsequently decided to constitute an Observer Group of six Observers, supported by six Commonwealth Secretariat staff, and informed the Caretaker Government and Commonwealth governments accordingly. (The composition of the Commonwealth Observer Group is shown at Annex I.) A press release was issued in London on Monday, 6 August.

Terms of Reference for the Commonwealth Observer Group

The terms of reference of the Group, as set out by the Secretary-General in his formal letter of invitation, were as follows:

The Group is established by the Commonwealth Secretary-General at the request of the Government of the Fiji Islands. It is to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the General Election in accordance with the laws of the Fiji Islands. It is to consider the various factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole and to determine in its own judgement whether the conditions exist for a free expression of will by the electors and if the results of the elections reflect the wishes of the people.

The Group is to act impartially and independently. It has no executive role; its function is not to supervise but to observe the process as a whole and to form a judgement accordingly. It would also be free to propose to the authorities concerned such action on institutional, procedural and other matters as would assist the holding of such elections.

The Group is to submit its report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, who will forward it to the Government of the Fiji Islands, the Fiji Electoral Commission, the leadership of the political parties taking part in the elections and thereafter to all Commonwealth governments.

Activities of the Group

One member of the Group, Mr Reuben Kaiulo, accompanied by a member of the Commonwealth Secretariat Staff Support Team, formed an 'Advance



OBSERVERS AT WORK . . .
Commonwealth Observer Group
Chairperson Sir Henry Forde
talking to fellow observers

Group' which began its work in Fiji Islands nine days before the arrival of the Main Group.

The rest of the Group assembled in Suva, the capital of Fiji Islands, on 19 August and was briefed by members of the Electoral Commission, the Supervisor of Elections, senior police officers and the Advance Group. The following day, Monday, 20 August, an Arrival Statement was issued at a press conference (see *Annex II*).

From 20 to 22 August the Group was briefed in Suva by representatives of political parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media organisations, Heads of Commonwealth High Commissions and other international observers. We held a further meeting with the Supervisor of Elections, Mr Walter Rigamoto, on Wednesday, 22 August. (A schedule of engagements is at *Annex III*.)

On 23 August the Observers and Secretariat team members deployed in six teams – five of two persons each and one consisting of a member of the Staff Support Team. Two teams were based in the capital, Suva. A further two teams were based in Nadi in the west of the main island, Viti Levu. One team was based in the second biggest island, Vanua Levu. The sixth team, of one person, visited some of the outlying islands and then supplemented the Nadi teams,

based in Lautoka.¹ The Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group, accompanied by the leader of the Staff Support Team, formed one of the two Suva-based teams, which also undertook visits to Nadi and to Vanua Levu where the Chairperson was briefed by the Observer Teams, visited polling stations and met with election officials and electors. (See *Annex IV* for details of deployment.)

Prior to the voting days the teams met with Divisional Commissioners, District Officers and senior police officers. We generally made ourselves visible, spoke with electors and saw the very end of the campaign. We were pleased to note that our presence was widely known and appreciated. On the seven polling days – Saturday, 25 August and then Monday, 27 August to Saturday, 1 September inclusive – the teams visited as many polling stations as possible, including several in the most remote areas. Altogether the teams observed voting at 332 polling stations, in all four Divisions.² The Group was given access to all parts of the voting process: the opening of the polls, the voting, the polling station closures and the transfer and security of the ballot boxes. The teams saw the 'opening' at some 25 stations and the closures at 29 and followed the sealed ballot boxes from the polling stations to their overnight accommodation on 19 occasions. Members of the Group also made a point of speaking with voters, party agents, candidates and election officials.

¹ This team travelled with the election officials and ballot boxes from Suva on a boat hired by the Elections Office. It visited five of the Lau islands, plus Kadavu and Ovalau.

² Several stations were visited more than once on one day. However, these figures exclude repeat visits.

During deployment the Observers were assisted by observation notes and checklists (see *Annex V*).

We were also present at all four counting centres (three were on the island of Viti Levu – two in Suva and one in Lautoka – and one was on the island of Vanua Levu, in Labasa) for the verification of the postal ballot and the counting of votes. Members of the Group were made to feel welcome wherever we went and appreciation was expressed for the Commonwealth's role.

From Monday, 3 September until we returned to Suva on 6 September for a debriefing and to prepare our Report we sampled the counting process at each of the four counting centres – two in Suva, one in Lautoka and one in Vanua Levu. We departed from Fiji Islands from the evening of 8 September.

On the basis of our reports during deployment, the Chairperson issued a Statement on the Voting at 2 p.m. on 3 September 2001 (see *Annex VI*). A further statement was issued on 8 September, after the counting of the votes (see *Annex VII*).

Throughout our time in Fiji Islands we co-operated closely with the United Nations Observer Group and observers from the EU/ACP Parliamentary Assembly, and were assisted by a UN-funded Electoral Assistance Project which provided maps, details of polling stations and background information.