

Chapter 1

Introduction

Following an invitation from the National Electoral Commission (NEC) of the Republic of Sierra Leone, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Mr Kamallesh Sharma, constituted an Observer Group for the 17 November 2012 National and Local Council Elections in Sierra Leone. In line with usual practice, the Secretary-General sent an Assessment Mission to Sierra Leone to evaluate the prevailing situation as well as the pre-electoral environment, prior to his final decision on whether to constitute a Commonwealth Observer Group. The Assessment Team was in the country from 10 to 15 September 2012.

The Commonwealth Observer Group was led by Mr Olara Otunnu, former Foreign Minister of Uganda and former United Nations Under-Secretary General and Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, and comprised nine eminent persons. The Observer Group was supported by a five-person staff team from the Commonwealth Secretariat. A full list of members is at Annex 1.

Terms of reference

'The Group is established by the Commonwealth Secretary-General at the request of the National Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone. The Group is to consider the various factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole.

It will determine in its own judgement whether the elections have been conducted according to the standards for democratic elections to which the country has committed itself, with reference to national election-related legislation and relevant regional, Commonwealth and other international commitments.

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 actions 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 Sierra Leone, the National Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone, and leaders of political parties, and thereafter to all Commonwealth Governments.'

Activities

The Observer Group was present in Sierra Leone from 11 to 23 November, 2012. During

three days of briefings, the Group met with the National Electoral Commission, political party representatives, the Inspector-General of Police, civil society groups, women's groups, youth and disability representatives, media, the diplomatic community as well as domestic, regional and international observer missions. The team observed the final rallies in Freetown prior to polling day. A list of organisations which the Group consulted is at Annex 7.

An Arrival Statement was issued on 14 November 2012 (see Annex 2). The Observer Group was deployed from 15 to 18 November 2012 across the country and covered 68 polling centres and 341 polling stations in the districts of Bo, Bombali, Kenema, Kono, as well as both Western Area Rural and Western Area Urban districts in the capital, Freetown (see Annex 5).

On deployment, teams met with electoral officials, security services, observers and other stakeholders at district level and members of the public to build up a comprehensive picture of the conduct of the process.

On Sunday 18 November 2012 the Chair, Mr Olara Otunnu, attended a meeting of chairpersons of international observer missions, held at the Bintumani Hotel. The meeting was chaired by the EU-EOM and attended by the African Union, ECOWAS and the Carter Centre. The observer missions exchanged views on the conduct of the elections.

On two occasions the Chair also visited the Situation Rooms run by the National Elections Watch and the Women's Situation Room.

On the basis of the Group's initial findings and observations, the Chairperson issued an Interim Statement on 19 November 2012 (see Annex 3). On 22 November 2012, the Chairperson and Heads of other international observer missions issued a joint statement (see Annex 4). The Group's Final Report was completed in Freetown prior to departure and transmitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General on 23 November 2012.