Freetown, 3rd November 2021: NEW Concludes Pre-election Assessment and Identifies Logistical Challenges for Policing the Elections

The National Election Watch (NEW) ahead of Local Council Bye-elections for Wards 069 and 091 in Kenema and Kono Districts respectively ended a two-day pre-election assessment on Sunday 31st October 2021. From engagements with key stakeholders in the Districts, the team identified issues ranging from inadequate logistics for the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) ahead of the elections, hesitation and trust around a level playing field for all candidates, importation of non-indigenes in both Wards, the presence and movement of marshals and persons in military fatigue during campaigns in Ward 091 and the lack of trust in the National Electoral Commission (NEC) as expressed by candidates and community people in Ward 091.

NEW met with the following stakeholders during the two-day pre-election assessment mission in both Kenema and Kono Districts: National Electoral Commission (NEC), Office of National Security (ONS), Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC), Sierra Leone Police (SLP), contesting candidates (APC, RUFP and SLPP for Ward 069 and APC, C4C, RUFP, SLPP and Independent Candidate for Ward 091), Paramount Chief of Sandor Chiefdom, Section Chief of Yawatanda Section, Attaya base Youth in both Wards, and Motor Bike Riders.

Two teams drawn from the NEW Strategic Management Committee (SMC), Regional and District Structures and Secretariat staff, formed the pre-election assessment team. The objectives of the mission were: to assess the preparedness of the Election Management Bodies (EMBs) and elections stakeholders, know the level of awareness and readiness for the two bye-elections, find out potential causes of violence and proffer recommendations to relevant stakeholders including the EMBs and the Security Sector for proper planning and engagement to ensure peaceful and credible elections.

KEY FINDINGS
The following are the findings from the engagements:

Political Parties Participation and Conduct

- In Ward 069, Kenema District, 3 Political Parties (APC, RUFP and SLPP) are contesting the Bye-election. Whilst in Ward 091 Kono District, 4 political parties (APC, C4C, RUFP and SLPP) and 1 independent candidate are contesting the Bye-election.
- Of all the 8 candidates contesting the elections in both locations, only 1 is a woman accounting for 12.5%. In both Wards, 6 of the candidates are young people accounting for 75% of youth participation as candidates.
- The independent candidate in Ward 091 reported that, during his campaign, the SLPP Ward Chairman, candidate, together with some supporters were in Memesia, Bangabaya, Maima and Small Sefadu villages on his (Independent candidate) campaign date which was on 28th October 2021, “obstructing” his campaign and using “vulgar language”. The matter has since been reported to the NEC and the SLP. NEW cross-checked this information and was informed by the Kono District Election Manager, that the SLPP Ward Chairman and supporters were on a development process to build a Barray. The SLP on the other hand,
confirmed receipt of the complain letter from the independent candidate and promised to investigate the matter.

- There is tension between the independent candidate and the C4C candidate leading to altercations during the campaigns. The C4C candidate alleged that, the independent candidate defames his candidacy during his campaigns, by referring to him as the “fake C4C” candidate.

**Preparedness of NEC**
- NEC has gone to all the centres in the localities and has firsthand information on the terrain. There are 7 polling centres and 24 polling stations in Ward 069 and in Ward 091, there are 7 polling centres and 17 polling stations.
- NEC trained potential candidates before the nomination on the 11th of October 2021.
- The nomination process of candidates has been completed and this was done over a three day period: APC on the 12th October 2021, SLPP, Independent candidate and RUFP on the 13th October 2021. After a court order allowing the C4C to participate in the Bye-election, NEC office in Kono conducted a nomination for the C4C on the 14th October 2021 in Ward 091.
- A stakeholder meeting was held in both wards where contesting political parties were admonished on the need for peaceful campaigns and elections.
- A campaign schedule was developed and agreed on by all parties during the stakeholder meeting.
- The recruitment process for polling staff was ongoing at the time of the engagement and NEW observed a recruitment advert publicly displayed at the centre of town in Kayima.
- NEC had employed 4 town criers in each of the two Wards and one of whom is a Person with Disability, to do voter education ahead of the Bye-elections.

**PPRC’s Preparedness**
- The PPRC has been collaborating with the NEC in all processes leading to the election ranging from the nomination, stakeholders meetings and monitoring of campaigns in both Wards. PPRC has adopted an institutional approach in addressing emerging issues ahead of the Bye-election through the District Security Committee (DISEC).
- The PPRC convened a stakeholders meeting on the 26th October 2021 in Freetown for candidates in Ward 091, Kono District and on the 30th October 2021 in Ward 069 in Kenema City, to admonish political parties and candidates on the need for peaceful conduct of the upcoming bye-elections. In these meetings, all political parties and election stakeholders signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).
- PPRC is planning to do a float parade during the cooling off period ahead of the elections in both Wards.

**Election Security Preparedness**
- Ward 091 which has 52 villages is normally manned by 4 police officers.
- The Mortema Police Division which has the responsibility to cover the election area in Ward 091 is planning an operation visit to the Ward before the Bye-election, to assess the security situation that will inform their man-power deployment.
- The police reported that the Mortema Police Division is currently constrained with mobility. The two land cruisers are grounded and there are no motor bikes to facilitate movement for the election in the Ward.
- In Ward 069, there has been increased number of police personnel and a new vehicle has been provided to police the election.
- NEW saw banners displayed by the SLP with peace messages and photos of H.E the President, Vice President and Inspector General of Police, in strategic places in Kayima Town, Sandor Chiefdom Kono District.
Signs of Mutual Respect and Tolerance
- All the candidates in Ward 091 reported that they have mutual respect for each other and that the SLPP candidate’s PA system is utilized during the campaigns of other candidates. This information was confirmed by the community people and 2 of the contesting candidates.
- In Ward 091, 3 of the 5 candidates hailed from the same village and repeatedly stated that they are a family and will not allow their family ties to break because of politics.
- The Paramount Chief of Sandor Chiefdom committed to promote peace among community people in the Ward and NEW observed the visit of 4 candidates and their supporters to his residence.

Observation/Concerns
- NEW observed that during the political party campaigns in Ward 091, there were a number of people, male and female, in military fatigue.
- The influx of marshals in black T-shirts during campaigns was a disturbing development for many of the indigenes in Kayima.
- Candidates and community people were apprehensive about a level playing field for the conduct of the elections and expressed their lack of trust in the NEC in Ward 091.
- In Ward 091 however, there are concerns of the voter education not reaching hard to reach communities due to bad terrain.
- The interference in the election process as sighted by some candidates in Ward 091 and the influx of non-indigenes in the localities were concerns raised by the community people in both wards. Also in Ward 091, the candidates alleged that people are imported from Koidu town and other districts during campaign periods.
- People whose ID cards were lost were concerned whether they will be allowed to vote during the bye-elections.

Recommendations
NEW recommends that:
- The continued use of marshals in black T-shirts by political parties and the presence of youth in military fatigue must be completely discouraged.
- Only NEC accredited persons and vehicles should be allowed into the election localities on polling day.
- The police step up their standards and beef up their preparedness in terms of personnel and logistics to adequately police the elections especially in hard to reach villages in Ward 091 and roads where violence is feared to happen through mobile patrols.
- The SLP must speedily respond to the complaint of the independent candidate regarding the violation of his campaign schedule.
- NEC to continue with the voter education effort especially in hard to reach villages to ensure citizens’ participation and minimize incidents of void votes.
- Paramount Chiefs continue to be neutral and provide a level playing field for all candidates and political parties in their chiefdoms.

Conclusion
NEW encourages all EMBs including the candidates in the bye-election processes to continue in the same spirit of unity and peace and urges NEC to conduct a free, fair, and credible bye-election with an outcome that has integrity and one that will be accepted by all.

National Election Watch (NEW) is a coalition of local and international organizations in Sierra Leone with a common objective of supporting free, fair and peaceful elections.

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