Press Statement for Immediate Release

Freetown, 15th November 2021: NEC Conducts Bye-elections in Ward 069 and Ward 091

The National Electoral Commission (NEC) conducted 2 Bye-elections in Ward 069 and Ward 091 in Kenema and Kono Districts respectively on Saturday, 13th November 2021. Generally, the voting process ended peacefully in both locations but violence erupted during counting in Ward 091 leading to the destruction of ballots and other voting materials. There were also issues of attempted use of fake voter ID card; a non registered voter of Ward 091 voted and later apprehended; campaigning within the polling precincts; and firing of teargas canisters.

National Election Watch (NEW) commends NEC for the initiative to conduct prompt voter education and sensitization at Yayah, in collaboration with other stakeholders during the election in Ward 091, which led to voters returning to the centre to vote. The voters had earlier abandoned the centre following violence which saw the deployment of additional police officers at the centre. NEW further commends the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) for the proactive action in conducting a float parade on the eve of the 2 bye-elections. The main objective of the float parade was to build confidence for peaceful elections. NEW notes the heavy presence of police officers in all polling centres.

National Election Watch (NEW) observed both Bye-elections in line with its mandate to assess the extent to which standards of holding democratic elections as espoused in the 1991 Constitution, the Public Elections Act (PEA) of 2012 and other regional and international principles are adhered to. NEW was accredited by NEC.

NEW observed the entire process including: opening, voting, closing and counting, tallying and the announcement of provisional results. NEW recruited, trained and deployed observers in all the 14 polling centres in both locations. NEW also deployed 4 Supervisors and 2 Roving Teams to monitor the elections. Additionally, NEW undertook a pre-election assessment, to gauge the preparedness of EMBs, Election Stakeholders and citizens and issued a public statement on its findings.

Findings
NEW wishes to announce the following in relation to the bye- elections in Kenema and Kono Districts:

i. Polling stations were opened on time across the districts.

ii. NEC Staff were mainly youth with a fair balance of male and female and inclusive of Persons with Disability in both locations.

iii. In Ward 069, Kenema District, whilst polling centres located in open spaces in the shade of trees were provided with canopies, some polling centres equally located in open spaces were not protected from the sun.
iv. The polling stations were well organized with proper layout and NEC staff intensified voter education in polling stations.

v. Essential voting materials (such as ballot boxes, ballot papers, seals, voting booths, voter register, NEC stamps, indelible ink and Result Reconciliation Forms (RRFs) were available in all polling stations. Tactile ballots guide were available in some polling stations.

vi. There were long distances between polling centres in Ward 091 Kono District.

vii. Hand washing facilities were available in all polling centres in both locations. Whilst voters in Ward 069 in Kenema, were using the hand washing facility, some voters in Ward 091 in Kono District were not using them.

viii. Temperature machines were not available in polling centres in Kono district. Whilst in Kenema district, there was a thermometer in one polling centre but it was not used.

ix. 3 political parties (APC, RUFP and SLPP) contested the election in Ward 069, Kenema District. In Ward 069, the APC and SLPP have the full contingent of party agents whilst the RUFP also has agents in most polling stations. In Ward 091, Kono District, 4 political parties (APC, C4C, SLPP and RUFP) and an independent candidate contested the election. 4 of the 5 candidates from the APC, C4C, SLPP and Independent, deployed party agents in all polling stations but the RUFP did not deploy any party agent.

x. There was a high presence of SLP in all polling centres in both locations. In Ward 091, Kenema district, police deployment was in two-fold. Whilst every polling station has a police outside the station, there was another set of police officers discreetly deployed. In Ward 091, Kono District, police officers were deployed in every polling centre and around the polling precincts.


xii. Senior NEC officials were also on the ground to support the process.

**Incidents**

I. At Centre Code 3135, Lutheran Primary School Bangabaya, polling station 1, at about 11:00am, a male voter, identified as Aiah Dauda, was caught in an attempt to use a fake voter ID card to vote. He was handed over to the police.

II. In Ward 091, Kono District, at Centre Code 3135, Lutheran Primary School Bangabaya, polling station 2, at about 1:00pm, a female voter identified as Finda Mohamed voted even though she registered at Ward 092. This was picked up by party agents and confirmed. A scuffle ensued when the political party agents insisted that her ballot should be removed from the ballot box. There was heated argument between the supporters of the contesting political parties and independent candidate. This halted voting for 40 minutes. NEC handed over the lady to the police for investigation. Key political party stakeholders were present in the scene, Karmoh Kabba of the APC and unidentified personality who came with a government vehicle.

III. At Centre Code 3131, Court Barray, Yayah, there was active campaigning within the precincts of the polling centre. This was picked up by an old man who was observing from afar and he then approached the man campaigning and an argument broke out. This attracted
the attention of voters, onlookers and the police. The chaos which erupted caused voting to stop for about 15 minutes. Following this incident, the police called for reinforcement and the arrival of additional police officers created panic and as a result, voters were afraid to go out and vote. NEC had to promptly do a community sensitization together with PPRC, SLP and community stakeholders to allay the fears of voters.

IV. At Centre Code 3131, Court Barray Yayah, polling station 1, a ballot paper was seen with a pen mark. A senior NEC staff noticed it whilst they were educating a voter; he promptly brought it to the attention of party agents and election stakeholders explaining the ramifications during counting. The issue was resolved and the said ballot was accepted as spoilt by all.

V. At centre code 3132, Temporary Polling Structure, Baudu, at around 9:00am, a man identified as SLPP District Chairman Kono District, Mr. Safea Moiwa, was seen using a white Toyota Hillux vehicle with a government number plate. He was loading and carrying people from the polling centre.

VI. At Centre Code 3131, Court Barray, Yayah polling station 2, during the counting process, the SLPP party agent protested over the validity of a ballot. The NEC official showed the ballot to other party agents who unanimously agreed that the ballot was in favour of the independent candidate. After a short while, he came back and snatched the ballot paper insisting that it should either be validated as a vote for SLPP or invalidated entirely. In the ensuing argument, another SLPP Party Agent for polling station 1 rushed and snatched all the ballot papers and was joined by a group of other militant youth who jumped into the polling centre, and destroyed the ballot papers and voting materials in the presence of police officers. Tear gas canisters were fired to disperse the crowd.

VII. The tallying was done at the SLTU Hall in Kenema City and NEC office in Koidu Town.

VIII. All political parties contesting the elections deployed candidates at the tallying centre in Kenema City. Only the SLPP deployed party agents at the Tally Centre in Koidu Town. Other stakeholders at the tallying in both centres include EU, US Embassy, British High Commission, PPRC, ONS and media.

IX. At the tallying in Koidu town, the recordings/entries on the Results Reconciliation Forms (RRFs) for 4 polling stations (Temporary Polling Structure, Baudu station 1, KDEC Primary School Foemangudu station 2, KDEC Primary School Koema station 1, Supreme Islamic Council Chendeya Station 1), did not reconcile with the number of ballots supplied to each polling station when inputted into the tally sheet. This error was detected by a senior NEC official. However, the issue was resolved amicably when it was discovered that the votes cast for each political party was not affected in these stations.

X. The votes for Centre Code 3131, Court Barray, Yayah in Ward 091 in Kono District, where ballots were destroyed, not counted and not part of the tallying has 594 registered voters. The total number of registered voters for the entire election in Kono is 4670.

Recommendations
NEW recommends that:

I. The SLP speedily investigate the circumstances leading to the destruction of ballots and other voting materials at Yayah in Ward 091, in the presence of police officers and make their findings public and the culprits prosecuted.

II. NEC must invest time and training in ad hoc staff to understand their responsibilities and to be more diligent in executing their duties.
**Conclusion**
The Commissioner for the Eastern Region and Commissioner South who presided over the elections in Ward 069 and Ward 091 respectively, should be commended for the level of tolerance and accommodating suggestions to make the process open.

*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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