PRESS STATEMENT FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Freetown, Friday 8th February, 2019: NEW urges EMBs, the Government of Sierra Leone and related Agencies to step up the healing process in Tonko Limba before the March 2 Re-run bye-elections in Ward 196

National Election Watch (NEW) is urging Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) i.e. the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and the Political Party Registration Commission (PPRC), the Government of Sierra Leone, Office of National Security and the Sierra Leone Police to step up efforts to address the concerns and nervousness of the people of Tonko Limba in Kambia district before the re-run of the bye-elections in Ward 196 scheduled for Saturday 2 March 2019. Bye-elections were held in Ward 196 in Tonko Limba chiefdom on 29 September 2018 and the process was marred by unprecedented violence that resulted in the shooting to death of a 14-year old boy in Masunthu village and the cancellation of the elections results by the NEC. Two other youths between the ages of 18 and 20 years – Yayah Conteh and Momoh Gbodo of the same village were believed to have been shot with live bullets in the hip and in the foot respectively. Both of them were left severely debilitated.

NEW after the observation of the 29 September 2018 bye-elections in Ward 196 immediately issued a press statement on its observations and findings and proffered recommendations entreating EMBs and related agencies to take immediate actions to address the issues that led to the violence in the first place and to pacify the affected communities. None of the EMBs or the agencies ever acted on the recommendations and the people of Tonko Limba continue to brood over their situation. In the midst of this, the NEC has announced Saturday 2 March 2019 as the date for the re-run of the cancelled elections in Ward 196. NEW therefore recalls the incidents that wrecked the 29 September 2018 bye-elections and wish to register its concern that nothing has been done to heal the psychological wounds of the affected communities. It is in this light that, NEW went on a two - day pre-election assessment mission in Kambia district on 5-6 February 2019 in advance of the re-run elections. Whilst there, the NEW team held two meetings with strategic stakeholders in the district on Tuesday 5 February 2019, which was also attended by district-level representatives of EMBs and RSLAF.

NEW replicated the meeting the following day in Gadalo village in Ward 196 for the Tonko Limba community. In both meetings, the people unequivocally blamed the importation of large numbers of youth (thugs) from different parts of the country, mainly from Waterloo, into Tonko Limba by politicians, the presence of political heavy weights of mainly the SLPP and APC with their menacing convoys and under-policing of the elections by the Sierra Leone Police. What NEW observed during both meetings was that the people of Tonko Limba are bitterly aggrieved, felt neglected, unfairly treated and abandon by those they should look forward to for protection.

In the circumstance, NEW recommends that for the 2 March re-run elections to be peaceful:

1. The investigation into the death of the 14 year old and wounded youths must be expedited.
2. Security forces must take necessary measures to stop the importation of youth (thugs) into Tonko Limba for the 2 March re-run bye-elections regardless of who is involved; defaulters must face the full force of law.

3. PPRC, NEC and security forces take necessary measures to stop political heavy weights and their convoys from entering Tonko Limba during the 2 March re-run bye-elections no matter the status of who is involved. Only those who have specific and legitimate responsibility to perform and are duly accredited by NEC should be allowed in the poling centers and immediate environs on the day of the elections.

4. ONS, NEC and the security forces to organize community dialogue meetings in the affected communities, particularly Masunthu village, ahead of the re-run elections.

5. NEC and civil society to engage the Tonko Limba communities on electoral education; and

6. The Government of Sierra Leone to support the affected families with the medication of their children suffering from bullet wounds with the elected MP of the constituency providing leadership.

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. NEW will continue to observe all elections and will report its findings accordingly.

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Contacts: Marcella Samba-Sesan +23276984590, James Lahai +23276962233, Sallieu Kamara +23276613324