PRESS STATEMENT FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Freetown Sierra Leone, 30th September, 2018:  Bye Election in Ward 196 Constituency 58 Tonko Limba Chiefdom Kambia District marred by Gross Intimidation, Thuggery and Excessive Violence- Polls cancelled.

NEW endorses the decision of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) to cancel the bye election held in Ward 196, Constituency 58, Tonko Limba Chiefdom, Kambia District held on Saturday 29th September 2018. The security of election staff and materials, observers and peaceful voters was seriously threatened by the activities of supporters of the Sierra Leone Peoples’ Party (SLPP) and the All Peoples Congress (APC) party who were throwing invectives and missiles at each other spilling over to election staff, observers and voters in the vicinity of polling centers. The presence of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) could not contain the violence resulting in the death of a 14 year old boy and damage to election materials. The intimidation and violence were largely due to the presence of senior political party operatives and transporting of large number of party supporters from other parts of the country into Ward 196. The vehicle registration number AFU466 with an NGO number plate was carrying SLPP supporters who were the most aggressive perpetrators of violence and intimidated both NEC staff and observers.

The violence was concentrated at four polling centers – KDEC primary school, center number 8056, Kagbonkoh (3 polling stations), St Marys Junior Secondary School, Mile 14 center number 8057 (4 polling stations), KDEC primary school Kayanka (2 polling stations) and Wesleyan Church S/L primary school, Masuntu, center number 8060 (4 polling stations). Polling started peacefully and orderly in all polling stations with voters turning out in their numbers to vote until at 11:00 am when SLPP supporters in mile 14 protested that APC Members of Parliament (MPs) serving as party agents should not move from their deployed polling stations to other polling stations in the center. The matter with police intervention was resolved. At about 11:30 am, the disturbances started with the transportation of party supporters to the vicinity of the polling centers followed with the arrival of senior political party officials. The women’s wing leader of the SLPP and the Resident Minister North/West Province were seen transporting people mostly youths that were very aggressive and violent. Present in the ward on the side of SLPP also was Hon. Manso Dumbuya and all three entered the demarcated polling center area against the NEC regulation of people qualified to enter polling centers. Ambassador Petito Koroma of the APC with a team of supporters was also moving from center to center and his presence sparked chaos between supporters of the two political parties. Present also were Dr. Denis Bright and Dr. Alusine Fofanah and a team from National Grand Coalition (NGC) political party both NGC party senior officials also entered the polling center demarcated areas; however, NEW observed that Dr. Denis Bright and Dr. Alusine Fofanah of the NGC comported themselves and participated in discussions to resolve problems.

NEW commends NEC for putting in place all that was required for a free, fair, transparent and credible elections. All polling stations opened on time with the required NEC staff and materials present. The NEC staff conducted themselves professionally in managing the voting process, NEC recruitment was inclusive, with women, youths and Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) included, Polling stations were mostly accessible to PWDs but the distance to polling centers was far causing community people to walk far distances to vote. All 3 contesting political parties had party agents in all polling stations.

The SLP presence was seen in all polling centers with every polling center having more than 10 police personnel. The police were not in the polling stations but were stationed outside in the center. The SLP failed to enforce the NEC regulation of keeping out persons without accreditation from entering the polling center as a result, NEW observed invasion of a polling station in Mile 14 by thugs and the ballot box damaged and ballot papers littered.

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observers, Commissioner N'fa Alie Conteh and other NEC officials were present during the clash between SLPP supporters and the community people in Masuntu Village with both sides brandishing local weapons. The SLPP supporters were chased by the community people and they ran towards the NEC officials and NEW observers using them as shield from the Community people. The military had to intervene in the situation. It was during this violence that the 14 year old boy was killed. NEW commends the LUC for responding to NEW’s call to immediately engage the leadership of the various political parties for them to contain their supporters which allowed for calm for the process to continue but this was short-lived and the situation deteriorated further. Also, whilst NEW is thankful to the LUC for providing security escort to its staff when they were threatened by supporters of the SLPP that they would not allow them continue with the observation of the elections; the police however failed to act on a tip off that some of the vehicles used by the party supporters were carrying cutlasses and other dangerous weapons an information which if acted on could have prevented the death of the 14 year old boy.

NEW believes that if a stop is put on the transportation of people from other parts of the country into the election locality, violence will be minimized around elections and therefore calls on the SLP, the Political Party Registration Commission (PPRC) and the NEC to effect the necessary regulations.

NEW notes that this is the first time in our recent democratic history that NEC had to cancel an entire election putting this as the highest risk to democracy in Sierra Leone. NEW consider this a waste of national resources, a threat to democracy practitioners and national security. NEW also recommends that senior political party officials should stay off from election locations and leave the party executive in the localities to manage the party affairs.

NEW recommends a constructive National Reconciliation Process to address the continued animosity between the APC Party and SLPP supporters. Until then, NEW further recommends that Military Aide to Civil Power (MACP) is invoked for future bye elections.

NEW requests immediate audience with the Government of Sierra Leone and calls for immediate and impartial investigations into the people behind the violence that led to the death of the 14 year old boy and the culprits brought to book.

NEW deployed observers in all 17 polling stations and had two supervisory teams that served as roving observers.

*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 bye elections and will report its findings accordingly.*

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