Freetown, 21st March 2022: NEW Concludes Pre-election Assessment in Constituencies 005 and 073 and Identifies Positive Steps by Political Parties to Consolidate Peace Ahead of Bye-elections

The National Election Watch (NEW) ahead of Bye-elections for Constituencies 005 and 073 in Kailahun and Port Loko Districts respectively, conducted a pre-election assessment and identifies positive steps made by political parties to promote political tolerance and consolidate peace ahead of the Bye-elections. In Constituency 005 Kailahun district, the Political Parties have reactivated the All Political Parties Association (APPA) bringing together the All Peoples Congress (APC), the National Grand Coalition (NGC), the Revolutionary United Front Party (RUFP) and the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) as the Political Parties active in the district, to serve as a platform to resolve grievances and aid information sharing amongst them in the district. A WhatsApp group has been created by the said association as one of the channels of communication and the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) is also included in this WhatsApp group. In Constituency 073, Port Loko district, the candidates have organized themselves to attend public events and jointly educate the public on peaceful elections. The fact that there has been no major confrontation since the campaigns started can be attributed to this commitment.

Notwithstanding this positive stride, there are concerns that may undermine the peaceful conduct of the Bye-elections, including tearing of campaign posters, accusation of the Town Chief in Mobai taking sides, obstruction of APC party meeting at Kuiva Village in Kailahun District, absence of radio station in constituency 073, which makes it difficult for voter education on radio to reach the voting population and logistical challenge of the Sierra Leone Police in both locations.

2 Pre-election assessment teams made up of members of the Strategic Management Committee (SMC), Regional/District Structures and the Secretariat staff, visited Constituencies 005 and 073 on 12th and 18th March 2022 respectively. The teams engaged the Election Management Bodies (EMBs) and Stakeholders during the pre-election assessment in both Kailahun and Port Loko Districts: National Electoral Commission (NEC), Office of National Security (ONS), Sierra Leone Police (SLP), Local Authorities, youth groups, the contesting Political Parties and opinion leaders. The pre-election assessment mission did an assessment of the preparedness of the EMBs and elections stakeholders, gauged the level of awareness of citizens on the Bye-elections, found out causes for potential violence and what should be done to mitigate such violence.

KEY FINDINGS
The following are the findings from the engagements:

Political Parties Participation and Conduct
- In Constituency 005, 2 political parties (APC and SLPP) are contesting the Bye-election and both candidates are female. In Constituency 073, 4 political parties (APC, NGC, PDP and SLPP) successfully went through the nomination process but someway in the process, the NGC candidate withdrew his candidacy in support of the APC candidate. According to him, the NGC is part of the Consortium of Progressive Political Parties (COPP) and therefore agrees to work as a team to win the election.
• In Constituency 073, of the 3 candidates, 1 is a woman making a total of 3 women in both bye-elections accounting for 50% female candidates. The NGC candidate who was the only youth has withdrawn his candidacy.

• In both Constituencies 005 and 073, there has been no display of open hostility by the candidates, but there are incidences of tearing of campaign posters of both the APC and SLPP in Bombohun Village near Pendembu and Baiima Kailahun District. The APC candidate and party executives engaged, reported that 2 SLPP supporters tore their campaign posters in a number of houses in Bombohun Village. The APC has since reported the matter to the police who visited the scene and confirmed that posters were torn. The SLPP District Chairman, Gbessay Jusu Jaka Ngobeh, stated that they had not received any complaint from the police nor the APC on the issue. However, he promised to engage with the APC through the All Political Party Association (APPA) platform in Kailahun to address the issue.

• Campaigns were peaceful as at the time of this engagement and there had been no breach of political party campaign calendar in both Constituencies. The APC candidate in Constituency 073 told the team that the training of their party agents will be conducted outside the Constituency to avoid the party gathering during the campaign period of other political parties. Equally, in Constituency 005, the SLPP District Chairman stated that, meetings of their party agents will be held outside the constituency to avoid collision with the APC during their campaigns. The Chairman further stated that, on days of the APC campaign, the SLPP removes their campaign posters from their vehicles to avoid conflict.

• The APC also reported that during their campaign, whilst meeting at a Barray in Kuiva Village, the Commissioner General, Samuel Jibao of National Revenue Authority (NRA), interrupted their meeting and demanded that they relocate to the Village Barray, as the Barray they were using was built by him for the SLPP. The community people intervened and insisted that the APC continue their meeting in the Barray. The APC candidate stated that, the SLPP candidate later went to the community and apologized for the obstruction.

Preparedness of ECSL
- ECSL has completed all nomination exercises in both districts.

- ECSL conducted 2 stakeholder meetings one in each Constituency held on 4th and 5th March 2022 in Port Loko and Kailahun districts respectively.

- Recruitment of polling staff was ongoing as at the time of the engagement and the candidates have already been shortlisted for training scheduled for the 21st to 24th March 2022 in both locations.

- ECSL will provide training of trainers for party agents who in turn will cascade the training to the rest of their party agents. The training will also include the SLP to be deployed for the elections. Political party agents and SLP will be trained on the 20th March 2022. The ECSL will train 33 representatives from each political party in Constituency 005. Decision of number of party agents to be trained in Constituency 073 had not been taken at the time of the visit. 10 SLP representatives from each of the 2 Police Divisions of Kailahun and Daru will be trained.

- Both manual and electronic accreditation process for observers, political party agents and the media, started on the 14th and ends on the 22nd March 2022. Additional 7 persons per political
party in Constituency 005 will be accredited as roving party agents. In Constituency 073, 5 persons per political party will be accredited for similar purpose.

- In Constituency 005, there are 24 polling centres and 69 polling stations. In Constituency 073, there are 23 polling centres and 63 polling stations.

- ECSL will continue engagements with the police and ONS in the regulation of the movement of political party heavyweights especially those without accreditation on E-day.

- Voter Education is ongoing; the ECSL recruited 18 town criers in Constituency 005 and 12 in Constituency 073 for voter education. In Constituency 005, the ECSL created a WhatsApp group to communicate and monitor the work of the town criers.

- The tallying of results will be held at the Pendembu Vocational Secondary School (PVSS) in Kailahun District and at the Port Loko District Council Hall, on the 27th March 2022.

- ESCL will establish a Situation Room on E-day in Port Loko District and encourages NEW to deploy at least 1 observer.

Election Security Preparedness

- ONS has been receiving updates from the ECSL in Port Loko at both District Security Committee (DISEC) and Provincial Security Committee (PROSEC) levels and also at the stakeholder meeting held on 4th March 2022.

- The ONS has been in touch with the 4 candidates to follow-up on their campaign plans and admonished them for a peaceful process in Port Loko District.

- The SLP provided security for campaigns on request by the political parties.

- The SLP will deploy police personnel at both polling station and polling centre level.

- The SLP has promised to tackle the issue of “political heavyweights” especially those without accreditation who move around on Election Day as it has always been a concern.

Observation/Concerns

- There were concerns raised over the voter education not reaching especially the hard to reach communities in both Constituencies like Ngegbema and Bomaru in Constituency 005 and in Constituency 073 Kagbunkor, Gbomtumba, Komrabai Nyolle.

- Voter education through radio engagement is challenging in Constituency 073, because of the absence of radio stations in the constituency, which has made it difficult for voter education on radio to reach the voting population.

- The ONS in Port Loko District, raised concerns over misinformation/disinformation on social media, movement and interference of political party “heavyweights” as potential threats to peaceful elections.
• The police divisions in both election localities have logistical challenges for mobility and communication to engage with the Bye-elections. The police is challenged and have difficulties responding to emergencies especially in hard to reach areas that are not motorable and require motor bikes which the police do not have in both constituencies.

Recommendations
NEW recommends that:
• ECSL, PPRC and the SLP put in place regulations that will discourage unaccredited persons moving into vicinity of polling centres on Election Day.

• The SLP to investigate the issue of tearing of campaign posters in Constituency 005 Kailahun district and the culprits to be prosecuted.

• The leadership of the political parties in both districts to continue to strengthen their commitment for political tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

• PPRC to inform political parties about their activities at the district level well in time for effective participation; e.g., the contesting political parties in Constituency 005 at the time of the visit, were not aware of the PPRC float parade. NEW believes that the float parade is a brilliant initiative for the public to see and hear from all contesting political parties preaching political tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

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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