Press Statement for Immediate Release

Freetown, 22nd June 2022: NEW Concludes Pre-election Assessment in Constituency 056 and 5 Wards ahead of Bye-elections on Saturday 25th June 2022 and conducted fact finding into the violence in Constituency 056

The National Election Watch (NEW), on the 17th and 18th of June 2022, conducted a Pre-Election Assessment in Constituency 056, Tonkolili district; Ward 031, Kenema district; Ward 138, Falaba district; Ward 252, Port Loko District; and Wards 212 and 216, Karene District. During the Pre-election Assessment, NEW engaged the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL), Office of National Security (ONS), Sierra Leone Police (SLP), Local Authorities, youth groups, the contesting Political Parties and candidates, and opinion leaders in all bye-election localities. Whilst the election environment in all the Wards visited has been calm and quiet; there has been repeated violence in Constituency 056, Tonkolili district.

The 6 Pre-election assessment teams comprised members of the Strategic Management Committee (SMC), Regional Coordinators, District level leadership of NEW, and the Secretariat staff. In Ward 031 in the Kenema district, 4 political parties (APC, NDA, PMDC, and SLPP) are contesting the bye-election. In Ward 252 in Port Loko District 3 political parties (APC, NDA, and SLPP) are contesting. In Ward 138 in Falaba, 212 and 216 in Karene districts only the APC and SLPP are contesting. In Constituency 056 also, only the APC and SLPP are contesting. Out of 11 candidates contesting in the various bye-elections, only PMDC and SLPP filled female candidates in Ward 031 in Kenema district. No independent candidates are contesting the bye-elections. Since the beginning of campaigns, there has been no violence reported in all the Wards, but this is not the case with Constituency 056. The greatest concern in the Constituency is the violence presumed to be partisan motivated.

Background to the Violence
The violence in Constituency 056 is mainly as a result of underlying factors finding expression in the bye-elections;

- The current Paramount Chief (PC) Musa Kolio Jalloh III contested the Parliamentary Election of 2018 and won against the current candidate of the APC in the forthcoming bye-election. The current PC was, therefore, the Member of Parliament of Constituency 056 representing the SLPP until his crowning as PC in 2022, resulting in the vacancy for which the bye-election is to be conducted.

- The campaign manager of the APC Rtd. Lt.Col. Joseph Sheku in the bye-election was an aspirant for the 2021 Sambaia Chiefdom PC election, which the current PC won. The campaign manager was disqualified at the Declaration of Rights stage of the contest. The APC campaign manager Rtd. Lt.Col. Joseph Sheku Jalloh and the 9 other candidates petitioned the election, and with the court order crowning, the PC was delayed.
• The Paramount Chief states that he has stopped Rtd. Lt. Col. Joseph Sheku Jalloh from erecting a petrol station until he produces a document proving his ownership of the land. The PC claims to be the sole custodian of land in the Chiefdom.

These factors listed above have given rise to a deep-rooted grudge amongst the key players in the bye-elections.

FINDINGS

The following are the findings from the engagements:

• The two candidates and the PC are blood relations.

• The violence is mainly perpetrated using thugs imported into the Constituency.

• There are 3 Wards (186, 187 and 188) in the Constituency with a total number of 20,581 registered voters.

• 2 Polling Centres (Open space Kawunkulu and Court Barray Kakarima) with 2 polling stations each are identified as very hard-to-reach areas. To access Kawukulu, one will travel by boat for 2 hours and then walk a distance of 5 miles, whilst for Kakarima, one will drive for some distance and walk for 6 miles to access the centre. There is no network coverage in Kakarima.

• On the first day of the APC campaign, on the 22nd May 2022, a young man by the name of Sheku Saccoh was accused of tearing the APC campaign poster and was mercilessly beaten by the APC supporters, only to realize that he was not the one that tore the campaign poster. The person who identified Sheku Saccoh did so to settle scores out of a grudge between the 2 of them. This event resulted in the SLPP retaliating by beating up another young man accusing him of tearing their campaign poster.

• A group of people from the Jalloh clan, including aspirants and candidates for the PC election in 2021 in Sambaia Chiefdom, declared their support for the APC candidate on 7th June 2022 in a meeting at the Bendugu Court Barray. The APC supporters then went around the town, jubilating the event of the declaration of support for the APC candidate. In the course of their jubilation, supporters of the APC apprehended a young man accusing him of spying on them and then beat him mercilessly. The supporters of APC, it is alleged then went on the rampage attacked and vandalized the house of the candidate of the SLPP and the house of the uncle of the SLPP candidate. It was further alleged that the supporters of the APC carted away a generator and destroyed other properties, burnt 2 new motorbikes and burnt the billboard of the SLPP candidate. The APC also alleged that one of their supporters was wounded on the head with machete and some houses of their supporters were burnt during the violence. The Rtd. Lt. Col. Joseph Sheku Jalloh is alleged to have transported thugs into the Constituency on the eve of the campaign and that they were mostly the ones that perpetrated the violence. The following day 8th June 2022, the police apprehended and arrested the Rtd. Lt. Col. Jalloh and 10 other APC supporters who are at the time of writing this report, still in police custody.

• There were only 4 police personnel present when the violence started and so was unable to quell the situation. Reinforcement was sent in comprising both police and military to restore calm in the town.
There were two state visits into the Constituency during this period. The President on the 24th of May 2022 went to the Constituency. The Vice President was also in the Constituency from the 9th to 11th June 2022. These two visits coincided with the days schedule for the APC party to campaign. For the visit of President Brig. Rtd. Julius Maada Bio, the APC was contacted and an agreement was reached between the two political parties to each forfeit a day to ensure the visit of the President did not disadvantage any party. With the visit of Vice President Dr. Mohamed Juldeh Jalloh, on the other hand, the APC states that they were not informed. On the 11th of June 2022 when the Vice President was to leave the Constituency, the 2018 presidential candidate of the APC, Dr. Samura W.M Kamara, was on his way to join the APC campaign in the Constituency. There was a standoff between the police and the APC supporters travelling with Dr. Samura Kamara with the police refusing them entry into the Constituency to avoid them crossing the Vice President and his motorcade on their way out of the Constituency. Dr. Samura and his team forced their way through all 3 checkpoints and went to Bendugu. On their way they met with the Vice President with his motorcade. Both the Vice President and Dr. Samura Kamara came down from their vehicles and shook hands before moving on.

The Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) in collaboration with the Electoral Commission Sierra Leone (ECSL) and other EMBs, organized a stakeholders’ meeting in Bendugu on Tuesday 11th June 2022. Both contesting political parties were invited. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the eruption of violence in the constituency and to put measures in place to address the issues of violence and to also sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The SLPP attended the meeting, but the APC party did not attend blaming their non-attendance to the police blockade.

The Paramount Chief has made some effort to be neutral and support a joint peace match by both candidates. Both candidates confirmed that the Paramount Chief requested them to do a budget for a joint peace match that he was prepared to support but that both of them did not get back to him.

The Paramount Chief has only the SLPP campaign poster pasted on the wall of his house. He said he requested for the APC campaign poster but it was not provided. The APC candidate confirmed the statement of the paramount chief.

In Ward 138, Falaba district, women leaders and Ataya base youth have been engaging in awareness raising on violence free elections.

The local chiefs are playing neutral role in all the Wards.

In Ward 031 in Kenema district, the candidates are collaborating to ensure peaceful and violence free election and also engaged in voter education ahead of the election.

ECSL and Election Peace and Mediation Group have conducted stakeholder meetings in all 6 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.
Electronic accreditation process for observers, political party agents and the media is ongoing as at the time of these engagements.

The tallying of results will be held on the 26th June 2022 in the election location; Constituency. 056 at the Tonkolili District Council Hall; Ward 031 at the ECSL Office in Kenema; Ward 138 at the ECSL in Mongor, Falaba; Ward 212 and 216 at the ECSL office in Karene district and Ward 252 in Port Loko district at the Port Loko District Council Hall.

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 leadership of the political parties in the wards to continue to strengthen their commitment for political tolerance and peaceful coexistence.
- The Sierra Leone Police should for subsequent elections ensure they deploy adequate personnel in communities where elections are scheduled to take place. The police should also be proactive in preventing rather than reacting to electoral violence.
- The Sierra Leone Police should as a matter of urgency investigate all the violence that occurred in constituency 056 and ensure perpetrators are prosecuted and made to account for their actions.
- Noting the trend of underlying factors manifesting into election violence, NEW calls on the National Council for Civic Education and Development and the National Commission for Democracy to engage communities on these issues in their civic education drive.
- State functionaries should endeavour to avoid state functions to coincide with campaign dates especially of opposition political parties. In the event where it is necessary that the holding of such event is imperative, then timely and proper communication should be done to avoid clash and the possibility of violence.
- NEW calls on the public to note that the police are responsible for internal security and maintenance of law and order and therefore their orders must be obeyed especially in volatile circumstances.
- NEW equally calls on the public to desist from the use of social media to heighten political tension in the country.
- NEW commends local authorities in all localities of the six bye elections and encourages them to continue to exhibit complete neutrality in their conduct and interaction with electoral processes.

Conclusion

NEW encourages all EMBs including the candidates in the bye-election processes to conduct themselves in the spirit of unity and peace and urges ECSL to conduct free, fair, and credible bye-elections 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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