Sierra Leoneans returned to the polls yesterday for the 24th June 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections. National Election Watch (NEW) deployed a comprehensive election observation strategy assessing the electoral process throughout the pre-election phase, on election day, and in the post-election period. For election day, NEW trained and deployed 6,000 observers across the country covering every polling centre. Out of these observers, 750 were specially trained and deployed to a statistically representative sample of polling stations across all the 5 regions and 16 districts in Sierra Leone using the Process and Results Verification for Transparency (PRVT) methodology. The PRVT allows NEW to assess the quality of election day processes and independently verify the official election results announced by the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL). NEW’s 2023 PRVT successfully allowing for the consolidation of findings that are representative of all polling stations at a national scale. NEW assures citizens that it has comprehensive data on the electioneering process.

Despite a tense pre-election environment in the lead up to election day, voting generally proceeded without significant interruptions, notwithstanding some critical incidents. The election was characterised by logistical challenges, but the environment remained relatively calm and without a significant number of reports of physical conflict. The ECSL struggled with delayed delivery of sensitive election materials in many polling stations. NEW also observed a lack of clarity in the requirements for voter identification, leading to inconsistent application of voter verification procedures. However, in the vast majority of polling stations across the country, many voting, closing of polling stations, and counting procedures were adhered to. NEW commends the resilience of the Sierra Leonean people in their determination to participate in electoral processes and exercise their right to vote.

This preliminary statement provides NEW’s detailed assessment of election day processes. NEW has gathered information from nearly 100% of its observers, rendering its PRVT a success. NEW will provide its verification of the official results and voter turnout as announced by the ECSL.

**Opening and Setup**

As noted in NEW’s mid-day statement yesterday, election day began with late opening of polling stations and missing materials in some areas. All NEW observers consistently had access to their assigned polling stations starting from the setup and opening processes and continuing throughout the day. The following details NEW’s findings on the setup and opening processes:

- Polling stations were set up in a manner that allowed both observers and party agents to observe the process.
- In 88% of polling stations, NEW observers reported that there were queues outside their polling stations at 6:30am. In 75% of polling stations, observers reported that there were no campaign materials present within 400 yards of the polling station.
- 56% of polling stations had at least 7 polling officials present. 96% had at least one woman polling official. Additionally, in 23% of polling stations the presiding officers were women.
- NEW observers reported that nationally, 82% of polling stations opened by 8am. 93% of polling stations opened before 8am in the Eastern region, 94% in the North and Northwest, 96% in the
South, and 59% in the Western region. Incidents of late opening of polling stations were higher in the Western region, where 41% of polling stations were not open as at 8am.

- 94% of polling stations had all sensitive voting materials available at opening (voters register, voting booths or screens, ballot boxes, ballot box seals, ballot papers, indelible ink). However, 6% of polling stations had at least one of these voting materials missing, with higher rates in the Western Region. 13% of polling stations did not have a tactile ballot guide.
- Of those polling stations that opened late across the country, 91% were missing at least one sensitive voting material.
- More than 99% of polling stations were set up so that voters could mark their ballots in secret. Additionally, in 98% of the polling stations the presiding officer showed the ballot boxes to be empty before being sealed. In instances where polling officials did not show that the ballot boxes were empty, observers confirmed that the ballot boxes were transparent and could verify that they were empty at the time of setting up.
- In terms of accessibility of polling stations to voters, 75% polling stations posed access challenges to people with disabilities and the aged because voters needed to use steps to enter the polling station. 86% of polling stations provided shelter from rain.
- Security officers were present in 89% of the polling centres.
- In 99% of polling stations at least one party/candidate agent was present at each polling station. APC party agents were present at 83% of polling stations, SLPP party agents were present in 92%, 43% of polling stations had agents present who represented other parties, and 12% of polling stations had agents of independent candidates.

**Voting**

Based on reports from NEW’s PRVT observers, many voting procedures were adhered to in the vast majority of polling stations across the country. However, NEW notes that there was a lack of clarity in the requirements for voter identification, which led to inconsistent application of voter verification procedures.

- NEW observers report that at 81% of polling stations, polling officials consistently checked voters’ fingers for indelible ink, and in 95% of polling stations, voters were consistently marked with indelible ink after voting.
- In 97% of polling stations, voters who were on the voter register, but without voter ID cards, were allowed to vote. Where these voters were allowed to vote:
  - In 73% of polling stations voters were permitted to cast ballots after comparing their photo and details from the voter register;
  - In 59% of polling stations voters cast ballots after showing proof of identity documents;
  - In 56% of polling stations voters cast ballots after showing an ECSL attestation form; and
  - In 34% of polling stations voters cast ballots after a witness attested to their identity.
- At 11% of polling stations, voters who were not on the voter register were allowed to vote. This may include polling officials, or may be due to inconsistent application of procedures for voter identification. This does not include security forces who voted at the last polling station in the centre.
- At 3% of polling stations, voters on the register were denied the chance to vote.
- NEW observers reported that at 81% of polling stations, polling officials consistently explained the voting procedures to voters.
- Voters with disabilities, the elderly, and pregnant women were always given priority to vote in 85% of polling stations. Voters received assistance when requested at 94% of polling stations. Visually impaired voters were given the opportunity to vote with a tactile ballot guide in 72% of polling stations.
- ECSL staff maintained order throughout the voting process in 85% of polling stations.
• In 8% of polling stations, voting processes were suspended for more than 30 minutes during the day, in many cases due to materials running out.
• Cases of intimidation, harassment, or violence during voting were reported in 3% of polling stations nation-wide.
  o A majority of these incidents specifically targeted women.
  o Amongst cases of intimidation, harassment, or violence, were incidents targeted at election observers. For example, a polling centre at Mesengbeh-Ansaural Primary School in Tonkolili District, was attacked by armed individuals. During the incident a NEW supervisor was attacked, had his property stolen, and was forced to flee into the bush. As noted in a UN Special Rapporteurs’ statement on the Situation of Election Observers as Human Rights Defenders, “these attacks, which may seek to deter or retaliate against election observers, create an environment of uncertainty and insecurity which undermines the legitimate work and findings of observers, impacts their ability to do their work and threatens their physical safety.”
• In 81% of polling stations, other election observation groups were present during the voting process.

Closing and Counting

Despite late opening of polling stations in some areas, closing and counting procedures were largely followed across the country. The closing and counting processes were observed by party agents and observers.
• In nearly all polling stations, voters in the queue at 5:00 PM were allowed to vote.
• NEW observers reported that nationally, 90% of polling stations closed by 6:00 pm and 10% after 6:00pm, and the counting process commenced. Of those polling stations that closed after 6:00 PM, 16% were in the Eastern Region, 10% in the Northern Region, 8% in the North West Region, 8% in the Southern Region, and 58% were in the Western Area.
• In 98% of polling stations NEW observers were allowed to observe the counting process without hindrance.
• Counting was conducted orderly and without interruptions in 97% of polling stations.
• Security officers were present during the counting process in 88% of polling stations.
• Nearly 100% of polling stations had at least one party/candidate agent present at each polling station during counting. APC party agents were present at 86% of polling stations, SLPP party agents were present in 96%, 45% of polling stations had agents present who represented other parties, and 15% of polling stations had agents of independent candidates.
• In 67% of polling stations, other election observation groups were present during the closing and counting process.
• All party/candidate agents present during counting signed the RRF in 92% of polling stations.
• In 13% of polling stations, party/candidate agents raised objections during the counting process.
• In 88% of polling stations, all party/candidate agents present during the counting process received a copy of the results protocol and 90% of polling stations had the RRF posted outside the polling centres.
• NEW observers reported that the closing and counting process took place without incident of violence, intimidation, or harassment in 97% of polling stations. However, in 3% of polling stations, NEW observers witnessed or experienced incidents of violence, intimidation, or harassment. For example, at Christ Standard Secondary School, in Hastings, Western Area Urban, ECSL staff attempted to return the ballot boxes to their office to tally, and were unable to because of the large amount of chaos at the centre.

Critical Incidents
NEW confirmed 57 critical incident reports from its observers. NEW notes that critical incidents at whatever scale erode public trust, especially in a context of an existing trust deficit in electoral processes. These include:

- **Logistical Challenges:** As noted in yesterday’s mid-day statement, 41% of polling stations in the Western Region were not open as at 8am. NEW incident reports largely attributed the late openings to logistical delays in the delivery of election materials. In one extreme case, NEW noted that a polling station at St. Ann’s Primary School in Freetown did not open until 8pm. Observers in the Western Region also noted that some polling stations ran out of voting materials throughout the day, including ballot papers, or had not received Results Reconciliation Forms (RRF) ahead of counting.

- **Disruptions in Voting:** NEW documented disruptions of electoral processes, ranging from tense disagreements to physical altercations at polling stations. Contestations around the inconsistent application of electoral procedures led to further disruptions in voting. For example, at DEC Primary School in Kombonkalia, Koinadugu District, NEW observed the destruction of a ballot box by an SLPP candidate for local council following a disagreement around the unavailability of ballot seals.

- **Disenfranchisement:** NEW observers noted instances, notably in Western Region, Port Loko, and Makeni, where the names of voters with ID cards or registration slips could not be found in the voter register. In one instance at Baptist Model Primary School in Makeni, the names of 200 voters from five polling stations with valid voter ID cards could be found in the voter register. The issue was resolved later in the day, by which time a good number of the 200 voters had already returned home. In another instance at Calvary Lutheran School in Western Area Urban, all voters with a surname that starts with the letter ‘K’ did not appear in the voter register at the centre. This matter was not resolved before the conclusion of voting.

**Recommendation and Calls**

**To ECSL:**

- NEW calls on ECSL to release election data in a timely manner, including polling station-level results, in an analyzable format to build citizens’ confidence in the results tabulation process in accordance with Open Election Data principles.
- NEW calls on the ECSL to increase accountability and transparency in the ongoing tallying processes, as an opportunity to build public trust.
- NEW recommends that ECSL investigates and publishes findings on reports of missing names from the voter register of individuals with valid voter ID cards.

**To the Sierra Leone Police:**

- NEW calls on the Office of National Security to continue to exercise professionalism and restraint in securing the results tabulation process.

**To all Sierra Leoneans:**

- NEW calls on all Sierra Leoneans, including political parties and their supporters, to maintain calm and patience while awaiting the official announcement of results by ECSL, as mandated by the law.

**Conclusions**

NEW continues to observe the ongoing tallying of electoral results and will update the public accordingly. NEW urges the ECSL to follow best practices and electoral procedures in accordance with the law for enhanced transparency.
ABOUT THE NATIONAL ELECTION WATCH

National Election Watch (NEW) is a coalition of over 450 registered national and international civil society and non-governmental organisations, established in 2002 to observe and monitor the fairness, transparency and credibility of public elections in Sierra Leone. NEW has observed all Sierra Leonean elections since 2002, including for the 2007, 2012, and 2018 national elections. In advance of the 24th June presidential, parliamentary, and local government elections, NEW has developed a comprehensive citizen election observation strategy that aims to provide an independent voice on the credibility and integrity of electoral processes.

A key component of NEW’s 2023 citizen election observation strategy is the *Process and Results Verification for Transparency* (PRVT), an advanced and proven election monitoring methodology that will allow NEW to independently verify the quality of election day processes and the official results. In light of the tense political dynamics ahead of the 2023 elections, the PRVT has the potential to be an important tool for mitigating electoral violence by reducing uncertainty in the electoral environment through accurate, representative, and timely analysis. NEW draws on experience successfully implementing PRVT methodology to observe the 2018, 2012, and 2007 elections, which provided an accurate assessment of election day processes and results.

National Election Watch (NEW) is a coalition of local and international organizations in Sierra Leone with a common objective of supporting credible and peaceful elections.

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