NEW MID-DAY SITUATIONAL STATEMENT

24th June 2023

ELECTION DAY BEGINS WITH LATE OPENING OF POLLING STATIONS AND MISSING MATERIALS IN SOME AREAS

The National Election Watch (NEW) was duly accredited by the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL) to observe the 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local council elections. For purposes of observation of the election day processes, NEW has trained and deployed more than 6,000 observers in the whole country. Out of these, 750 observers were specially trained and deployed in sample polling stations across all the 5 regions and 16 districts in Sierra Leone using the Process and Results Verification for Transparency (PRVT) methodology.

PRVT is an advanced and proven election monitoring methodology that utilizes scientific sampling to accurately assess what is happening at all polling stations nationwide. In implementing this methodology, NEW draws on its experience in successfully executing PRVTs to observe the 2018, 2012, and 2007 elections, which provided an accurate assessment of election day processes and results.

This situational statement is based on observation and incident reports filed by 98% of NEW PRVT observers on the set up and opening processes as of 2PM on election day. In addition, it also includes incidents reported by NEW’s regular observers across the country.

NEW has so far observed the following:

Opening and Set-up

- NEW notes that so far, all its observers had access to their assigned polling stations.
- 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.
- 55% of polling stations had at least 7 polling officials present. 96% had at least one woman polling official. Additionally, in 22% of polling stations the presiding officers were women.
- NEW observers reported that nationally, 84% 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.
- 91% 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, 9% 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, 84% were missing at least one sensitive voting material.
- 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.
- Security officers were present in 89% of the polling centres.
In 99% of polling stations had at least one party/candidate agent present at each polling station. APC party agents were present at 83% of polling stations, SLPP party agents were present in 93%, 42% of polling stations had agents present who represented other parties, and 12% of polling stations had agents of independent candidates.

Critical Incidents

Since the polls opened, NEW has received and confirmed 12 critical incident reports from its observers. These include:

- Late opening of polling centres as a result of incomplete or unavailable sensitive materials
- Missing data of voters: where names and details of voters with voter cards or slips are not found in the register.
- Unavailability of validation stamps in polling stations
- A man was arrested by the police for being in possession of ballot papers at a polling centre in Makeni.

Conclusion

NEW calls on ECSL to respond to centres that have not opened. Equally NEW calls on ESCL to resolve issues of voters with IDs whose names were not on the register.

NEW will continue to observe the voting, closing and counting and results processes and keep the public informed periodically on the key observations and findings.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL ELECTION WATCH

National Election Watch (NEW) is a coalition of over 450 registered national and international civil society and non-governmental organizations, 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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