

NEW National Election Watch

**A Coalition of Civic groups, Labour Unions, Professional Associations and Religious Organizations
in Sierra Leone**

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT ON THE 14 MAY GENERAL ELECTIONS IN SIERRA LEONE

Issued: 15 May 2002, 11:30 AM

INTRODUCTION

This preliminary statement is issued by the National Election Watch (NEW), a coalition of eighteen civic groups, labour unions, professional associations and religious organizations in Sierra Leone. NEW observed the Presidential and Parliamentary elections held throughout the country on 14 May 2002. This statement is based on the observations of more than 2,000 NEW observers who were trained to watch the polls in all 14 districts of the country. The Coalition was accredited formally by the National Elections Commission. At this early stage, barely twenty-four hours after the close of polling, the Coalition wishes to make the following preliminary pronouncements on the conduct of the elections. An interim statement that contains substantive judgments will be issued within the next forty-eight hours and a final report within four weeks.

PARTICIPATION

The large and enthusiastic turnout of the people of Sierra Leone on voting day is highly commendable. Voting was peaceful, good natured and violence free. Against the background of a horrific war that has only just ended, this is a remarkable assertion by the people of Sierra Leone of taking national decisions by peaceful means, and a convincing repudiation of violence.

VOTING MATERIALS

Most polling stations observed had enough voting materials and voting in most of them started on time or at least before 8 am. There were few documented exceptions to this.

INCIDENTS

No incidents of violence were observed and the voting process was transparent. Ballot boxes were transparent and in full view of polling officials, party agents, observers and voters.

SECURITY

There were no reports of breaches of security on polling day. The Sierra Leone Police and UNAMSIL were generally vigilant but did not intimidate voters. Their presence and behaviour were reassuring and played a positive facilitative role.

VOTER EDUCATION

In many instances however, people did not know how to vote. Efforts to educate voters on the spot undermined voter secrecy.

Also, NEC was unable to effectively communicate changed instructions. Statements from NEC on polling day were understood differently by people involved in the process. This created some confusion amongst some voters and polling officials. The most obvious instance of this was the announcement by the NEC chairman that people could vote in centres where they had registered even where their names were not on the voter registers of those centres. Some people interpreted this to mean they only needed to show their voter ID cards to vote in any centre.

Some confusion was also created by inadequate information relating to the merging of polling centres. This created some frustrations in the earlier period of the voting, as many people did not know the locations where their names could be found.

POLLING AGENTS, NEC OFFICIALS AND OBSERVERS

In the Western Area, polling stations observed all had APC and SLPP party agents. Other parties with significant numbers of polling agents were the PLP, MOP and UNPP. In the Northern Province, the APC and SLPP fielded the most party agents. In the Southern and Eastern Provinces, only the SLPP had significant party agent presence.

The relationship between polling officials, party agents and observers were generally cordial and cooperative. NEC officials were generally helpful to observers.

*Freetown, Sierra Leone
7 Lightfoot Boston Street
076 638 515*