



## NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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PRELIMINARY STATEMENT  
of the  
NDI OBSERVER DELEGATION  
to the  
June 12, 1996 Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh  
June 14, 1996

The multinational election observer delegation organized by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), led by former U.S. Congressman Stephen Solarz and former Australian Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock, is pleased to offer this preliminary statement on the Bangladesh parliamentary elections of June 12, 1996.

Our 30-person delegation includes members of parliament, election officials, civic and political leaders and regional experts from 16 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East and the Americas. The delegation was welcomed to Bangladesh by the President, the Caretaker Administration of Chief Advisor Muhammad Habibur Rahman, the Central Election Commission and leaders of all the major political parties. NDI sent two pre-election missions to Bangladesh in the month before the elections. Those delegations held extensive consultations with senior government and election officials, party leaders, journalists and civic leaders. NDI staff members have been present in Bangladesh throughout most of the past 18 months, and the Institute has maintained an election observing presence in the country continuously since May 6.

Our delegation came to witness the elections and provide a public report of our observations. Our purpose here has not been to supervise or certify the election, nor to interfere in any way — for it is the Bangladeshi electoral authorities, and ultimately the people of this nation, who must judge the quality and character of these elections.

Following the arrival of the full delegation on June 8 and briefings from election officials, political parties and domestic election monitors, members of the delegation were deployed on June 10 in 16 teams to locations throughout the country. After witnessing the balloting and counting in polling centers throughout the country, the delegation reassembled in Dhaka on Thursday to review the findings of each of the teams. The delegation visited polling stations in 36 constituencies in all six divisions and more than half of the 64 districts. Members of our delegation also witnessed the counting in more than 20 locations.

We have remained in regular communication with all the major political parties as well as with the principal nonpartisan Bangladeshi monitoring organizations, the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) and the Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB). We have also



stayed in close contact with the other international delegations that observed the June 12 elections, sharing information regularly and coordinating our movements around the country in order to complement one another's observation. In addition, NDI staff members will remain in Bangladesh for several weeks to observe post election developments, including the resolution of disputes and the acceptance of results

#### Observations

The election process as we have observed it has been generally peaceful, open and well-administered. Congratulations are due to the people of Bangladesh. We commend the Chief Election Commissioner, Mr. Abu Hena, and his many colleagues throughout the country who have worked tirelessly and efficiently to organize these elections in such a way that has won the confidence of the vast majority of Bangladeshis. The Election Commission's commitment to transparency and thoughtful consideration of suggestions put forward from many quarters, including the international community, has been rewarded by a successful election. Indeed, our overall impression is that these elections have been a magnificent demonstration of democracy in action and have established a basis for Bangladesh to emerge from the political crisis that has recently beset the country.

There were problems on election day, though they appear to have been localized. We regret the tragic loss of life that has occurred in several election-related incidents. Nevertheless, we are impressed by the fact that only 123 polling stations, of a total of 25,957 -- less than one half of one percent -- were obliged to discontinue voting due to disruptions. This testifies to the administrative achievement and the generally peaceful conditions that prevailed. (In those constituencies where polling was suspended, we understand that re-voting will occur before the results are declared.)

We have also been favorably impressed by the high turnout and enthusiasm of the voters of Bangladesh, and we are heartened that women in particular voted in such large numbers. While many places were quite crowded early in the day, and more could perhaps have been done to streamline the process in some cases, it appears that -- with the significant exceptions in the Chittagong district noted below -- all eligible voters who desired to vote were able to do so.

Many Bangladeshis praised the voter education efforts of both the Election Commission and nongovernmental organizations, and the voter education appears to have contributed to the smooth conduct of elections characterized by high turnout and few spoiled ballots. We also note that pre-election apprehensions about potential problems with voter registration lists proved on election day to be unfounded.

Agents of the major parties were present in virtually every location we visited, and they seemed to respect one another and cooperate well with election officials. While some last-minute campaigning was conducted at the various party "camps" outside of polling stations, the positive contribution made by the party activists at these information centers clearly helped facilitate the electoral process. This not only speaks well for the organizational capacity and commitment of the parties, it provides an important assurance that each of the parties has been able to monitor the

election process. We assume that the parties or candidates will file with the electoral authorities those complaints for which they have well-documented evidence, and that they will rely on the established procedures for adjudication. We note that leading officials in both the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party have complained to us about widespread election day violence and other improprieties by opponents, but they have to this point provided us with little specific information. The very real problems of intimidation and illegality that our teams witnessed in Chittagong, and other noteworthy problems in Comilla, appear to be attributable to individual candidates and their supporters.

The police, Bangladesh Rifles and local ansars were present in all locations we visited as they were supposed to have been and appeared, in most places, to have kept order properly and at the direction of the presiding officers. In light of concerns expressed on the eve of the elections that certain army officers were contacting presiding officers to obtain voter lists they had no need for -- a matter that the Chief Election Commissioner promptly addressed -- our teams were alert to any possible activity by the military that might have been contrary to the law. It is our view that the army maintained a professional and neutral posture towards the elections, acting only when summoned by the appropriate electoral authorities. The breakdown in public order in some areas in Chittagong district demonstrate the need for sufficient police manpower to be available in these areas and suggests that better communications systems are needed by the police to enable them to respond more efficiently in the future.

We regret that in some locations observation credentials were denied to most or virtually all FEMA and other Bangladeshi election observers. It is unfortunate that political parties were allowed to object wholesale to proposed domestic observers without cause. Our assessment is that FEMA's leaders and volunteers are, in the main, impartial. Moreover, the contribution that domestic monitors can make to public confidence in the election process is considerable, as has been demonstrated in many other countries. To enhance the transparency of the process, therefore, we urge that for future elections appropriate authorities clarify that local observers be permitted to observe all aspects of the election, including the ballot count, if necessary by amendment to the electoral law.

#### Chittagong

We note with dismay that the nationwide pattern of generally exemplary polling was marred by significant instances of intimidation, violence and fraud in Chittagong district and other areas with large minority populations. Our teams directly observed the harassment of minority voters in Chittagong constituencies 6 and 7, where threats of violence, particularly against Hindu women, were made to discourage many who wanted to vote from actually voting. Some, to be sure, voted in spite of such threats. Yet to those members of our delegation who interviewed such women the expressions of fear on their faces etched a memory more indelible than the ink on their fingers. The continuing political and human rights problems of ethnic minorities in Chittagong district and some other areas, which manifested themselves on election day, remain a major obstacle for democratic development in Bangladesh. Our delegation urges the government and all political leaders to enhance their efforts to protect the rights of its minority citizens. We hope that the appropriate agencies will

pursue and prosecute those individuals who wilfully and deliberately acted to deprive minorities of their right to vote on June 12

#### Conclusion

We congratulate the people of Bangladesh for their achievement in demonstrating once again and in overwhelming numbers their commitment to democracy. The triumph of this election has renewed in each of us our own faith in the universal values of democracy. We urge the party or parties that form the next government to reach out to their rivals in a spirit of reconciliation and cooperation. It is essential that they adopt a posture of respect and civility toward those that will serve for a time in opposition. We urge those parties that do not participate in the next government to accept their defeat graciously and with dignity and to take up their vital role as a responsible and loyal, democratic opposition. All parties have an obligation to respect the will of the people, as expressed in the elections of June 12. The international community, no less than the people of Bangladesh, expects that political and policy differences will henceforth be resolved in the Jatiya Sangsad, rather than in the street. We hope that all Bangladeshis will join together to build on the accomplishments we have witnessed here in the last few days. What happens in the aftermath of Wednesday's election will be as important as the election itself in creating the basis for an enduring democracy.