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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **SIERRA LEONE: HIGH VOTER TURNOUT IN PEACEFUL, WELL-ADMINISTERED NATIONAL ELECTIONS**

Freetown, August 13, 2007 – An international observer delegation to Sierra Leone’s 2007 elections sponsored by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) today issued a preliminary statement on the August 11 polls. The NDI delegation considers that the pre-electoral and election day processes were transparent, credible and largely peaceful, and applauds the determination of the people of Sierra Leone, who turned out in large numbers to exercise their civic and political rights. The NDI observers also acknowledge the high level of professionalism of National Electoral Commission (NEC) officials in the conduct of these elections, and the commitment of all stakeholders – Sierra Leonean government and electoral officials, candidates, political, civic and religious leaders and the media -- to a peaceful, democratic electoral process.

Comprised of 42 experienced political and civic leaders, human rights activists and election experts from 16 countries in Africa, Europe, and North America, the NDI delegation was deployed to all regions of the country. The NDI observation mission was co-led by Nora Owen, former Minister for Justice and former Member of Parliament (Ireland); Ken Nnamani, former Senate President (Nigeria); Audrey McLaughlin, former Member of Parliament and former leader of the New Democratic Party (Canada); Carol Lancaster, former Deputy Administrator of the US Agency for International Development and Director of the Mortara Center at Georgetown University (United States); and Christopher Fomunyoh, Senior Associate for Africa, NDI (Cameroon). The August delegation built on the recommendations of two NDI pre-election assessment teams, as well as on the observations of the Institute’s Sierra Leonean partners. The delegation also drew on the findings of a team of NDI long-term observers, who have monitored political developments in all of Sierra Leone’s 14 districts since April 2007.

The August 11 elections are the second national polls since the cessation of armed conflict in 2002, and the first under the full sovereign control of the Government of Sierra Leone. As one Sierra Leonean citizen told a member of the NDI delegation, “these elections are a test of whether democratic culture is here to stay.” While emphasizing that its assessment is preliminary, as votes are still being tallied and official results have not yet been announced, the NDI delegation feels that, thus far, the people and institutions of Sierra Leone are in the process of meeting that test.

Looking forward, it is critical that all Sierra Leonean stakeholders act responsibly to ensure that the post-election period continues smoothly. It is imperative that a proper and transparent process be fully implemented in determining the results, and that as credible results are announced, political parties act peacefully and in accordance with the rule of law. Should a run-off presidential election be required, the Sierra Leonean authorities, contesting parties, candidates and civil society will need to redouble their efforts to bring this largely successful process to completion, honoring the will of the people. Sierra Leoneans and the international community should watch closely, and hold accountable anyone who seeks to undermine the credibility of the process and the peace and security for which Sierra Leoneans have worked so hard.

The delegation greatly appreciates the openness of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and Sierra Leoneans at all levels to suggestions from stakeholders, and offers the following recommendations in the spirit of international cooperation and in the hope of building further confidence in the electoral process:

**To the National Electoral Commission:**

- The NEC should maintain its commitment to announce and certify results in the most transparent and timely way possible, in order to ensure confidence in the tabulation process and reduce potential for tension in the electoral environment.
- The NEC should ensure timely and adequate transmission to its staff of any changes to the electoral procedures.
- For future elections, polling staff should have clarity on voter identification procedures, the counting process, and the completion of forms.
- To enhance voter education efforts that specifically target how to mark the ballots, the NEC should post illustrations in the polling area of acceptable ways to mark the ballots.
- The NEC should improve signage in all polling stations and improve the management of polling centers.
- Polling officials should be commended for devising solutions to problems that arose on election day, such as broken hole punchers. However, the NEC should put policies in place to ensure that these pragmatic solutions are taken into account when establishing procedures for future polls.
- In the case of a run-off, the NEC should redouble its efforts to provide voters, political parties, and candidates with the information required for them to effectively participate in the electoral process.

**To Political Parties and Candidates:**

- Parties and contestants should call on their supporters to stay calm and patiently await the announcement and certification of results and in no case resort to violence to disrupt the process.
- Political contestants should publicly accept credible results as soon they become apparent. If grievances arise surrounding the tabulation and announcement of results, parties should make use of complaint procedures, including the Electoral Offences Courts and Election Petitions Courts.
- Parties should not use their “task forces” to undermine the process.
- Parties should actively seek to recruit and deploy women as party agents and nominate women candidates.

**To the Electoral Offences Courts and Election Petition Courts:**

- The Electoral Offences Courts and the Election Petition Courts should proceed with any and all appropriately filed petitions in a transparent and expedited manner, impartially determine the merits of cases and provide effective, timely remedies. These courts should be properly staffed and adequately funded.

**To Civil Society:**

- Civil society should build upon the current momentum and continue to engage in future elections and contribute to long-term democratic processes.
- Organizations involved in nonpartisan election monitoring should extend their activities through the post-election period and in the event of a run-off.
- Civil society should redouble its efforts to conduct voter and civic education campaigns.

**To the Government of Sierra Leone:**

- The Government of Sierra Leone should enhance its support to independent institutions such as the NEC and the PPRC and provide them with sustained and adequate funding.

**To the International Community:**

- The international community should increase its support to Sierra Leone’s democratization efforts, assist in further strengthening institutions and continue monitoring political processes.
- International election observation organizations should extend their monitoring efforts in the event of a run-off.

The full text of the delegation’s preliminary statement can be found at [www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org).