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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SIERRA LEONEANS CHOOSE THEIR NEXT PRESIDENT IN PEACEFUL, TRANSPARENT RUN-OFF ELECTION

Freetown, September 10, 2007 – An international observer delegation sponsored by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) today issued a preliminary statement on Sierra Leone's September 8 presidential run-off election. Despite heightened tension and several reported instances of election-related violence during the campaign period, the delegation considers that the overall electoral process was generally transparent and peaceful. The delegation applauds the determination of the people of Sierra Leone, who turned out in large numbers to exercise their civic and political rights, and commends the high level of professionalism of most National Electoral Commission (NEC) officials in the conduct of these elections. NDI observers also recognize the strong commitment of Sierra Leonean political parties, civil society organizations, religious leaders, and media to a peaceful, democratic electoral process. It is the delegation's sincere hope that participants in the run-off election will continue in the spirit of democratic competition through the period of vote tabulation and the official determination of the successful candidate for president.

Comprised of 35 political and civic leaders, human rights activists, and election experts from 18 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); and Christopher Fomunyoh, Senior Associate for Africa, NDI (Cameroon). The delegation built on the recommendations of an NDI-sponsored observer mission to the August 11 national elections and pre-election delegations fielded in March and July 2007. It 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, as well as on the observations of the Institute's Sierra Leonean partners.

The September 8, 2007 elections mark the first time in Sierra Leonean history that a democratically elected president will have served two full terms and transferred power to another democratically elected leader. Sierra Leoneans voted in large numbers and election day was peaceful. The polls were well-administered in the majority of the areas that the NDI delegation observed. While emphasizing that its assessment is preliminary, as votes are still being tallied and official results have not yet been announced, the NDI delegation notes important improvements in electoral administration since the first round that enhanced the efficiency and transparency of the process. If successfully completed, this election would confirm the commitment of Sierra Leonean citizens and institutions to democratic governance.

The delegation urges all Sierra Leonean stakeholders to act responsibly to ensure that the post-election period continues smoothly. A fair and transparent process should be implemented in determining the results, and as official results are announced, political parties should act peacefully and in accordance with the rule of law. Sierra Leoneans, with the support of 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. For the electoral process to be truly meaningful, the newly elected government should strive to meet the expectations of citizens and institute policies that improve their well being. Elected leaders should take concrete steps to mitigate inter-regional tensions, conduct their duties with integrity, manage the nation's resources for the good of the country, and provide opportunities for the country's youth.

NDI greatly appreciates the NEC's openness to suggestions from Sierra Leonean stakeholders and international partners, and thanks the people of Sierra Leone for their hospitality and support for the delegation's work. The delegation offers the following recommendations in the spirit of international cooperation and in the hope of building further confidence in the electoral process:

To Candidates:

- Candidates should call on their supporters to stay calm and patiently await the official announcement and certification of results.
- If candidates wish to challenge the outcome of the election, they should seek redress through the proper legal mechanisms in accordance with the rule of law.
- Upon conclusion of the electoral process, including the resolution of any complaints that may be lodged, both candidates should publicly accept the results, and encourage their supporters to do the same.

To the National Electoral Commission:

- The NEC should consolidate the procedures that worked well during these elections, drawing upon the successes of the 2007 elections to reinforce best practices for future elections.
- The NEC should carry out a thorough investigation into complaints or allegations of malfeasance.

To the Supreme Court:

- The Court should fairly and expeditiously handle any complaints that may arise.

To the Government of Sierra Leone:

- The Government of Sierra Leone should ensure that the transfer of power from one democratically elected president to another proceeds peacefully.
- The Government of Sierra Leone should take responsibility for supporting an independent NEC, including providing sustained and adequate funding.
- The Government of Sierra Leone should take steps to ensure that Paramount Chiefs are neutral and impartial during electoral processes.

To the Sierra Leone Police:

- The SLP should remain vigilant in the post-election period and continue to work with other stakeholders to maintain peace and order.
- The SLP should reinforce its outreach initiatives to civil society organizations and the media to facilitate a better understanding of citizens' rights and responsibilities.

To Political Parties:

- Political parties should create structures that allow them to organize nationally, and ensure that pluralism and tolerance are practiced at all local and regional levels.
- Political parties should consolidate gains made in the galvanizing of grassroots support and the deployment of party agents.
- Parties should actively recruit and support the participation of women and youth in the democratic process, including as candidates in the upcoming local elections.

To Civil Society:

- Civil society organizations should draw on their collective experience monitoring the elections to enhance their efforts to advance democratic practices in the post-election period.
- Civil society should continue to work with all stakeholders to discourage the circulation of rumors that may undermine peace and stability in Sierra Leone.

To the Media:

- The media should abide by the Media Code of Conduct and provide accurate and balanced reporting on political and electoral processes. This will be particularly important in the period ahead, as results are tabulated, any complaints are resolved, and the electoral outcome is determined.

To the International Community:

- The international community should increase its support to Sierra Leone's democratization efforts, assist in further strengthening institutions, and continue to monitor political processes in the country.

The full text of the delegation's preliminary statement can be found at www.ndi.org.