

Independent Election Monitoring Group (IEMG)

An Independent Report on the Sierra Leone Presidential and Parliamentary Elections

**Saturday 11th August, 2007
Saturday 8th September, 2007**

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Introduction

This is a report issued by IEMG, a coalition of civil society organisations that monitored both the initial Presidential and Parliamentary elections held on the 11th August, 2007 and also the run-off Presidential elections held on the 8th September, 2007.

This report is based on the observation of ten polling stations in the Western Area urban.

IEMG was formally accredited by the National Electoral Commission to monitor the elections.

Polling Stations observed:	14198
	14228
	14230
	14242
	14328
	14329
	14357
	14360
	14361
	14363

Presidential and Parliamentary Elections: August 11th, 2007

Run-off Presidential Elections: September 8th, 2007

Preparations of NEC

- ❖ NEC is to be commended for the overall delivery of materials to polling centres visited by IEMG. The only problem encountered concerning late delivery of materials was actually as a result of the SLP being absent when materials first arrived at 5am to centre number 14230.
- ❖ NEC had not adequately prepared for those staff who were either sick or failed to attend for work on election day. In polling centre number 14360, station 3 the Presiding Officer was forced to carry out his own function and that of another official whom had failed to attend for work. This was clearly unsatisfactory and led to confusion and arguments within the station.
- ❖ The electoral lists themselves seemed to cause some confusion at polling centre 14363. NEC officials encountered problems trying to read them due to the numbering. As a result, registration numbers and names were simply being added to the list at the back of the registration lists.
- ❖ A number of reports emerged during the first election as to the presence of practice materials within polling centres. This created confusion and allegations of tampering when removed.

Training of NEC Officials

Several problems with the training of officials were noted throughout the visits to polling stations in the Western Area Urban.

- ❖ More training is necessary as to the appropriate procedure in which polling officials, and observers may themselves vote. Officials were observed in polling centre 14230 checking their own names off lists which could easily have led to instances of fraud. Also a question arose in polling centre 14230, station 1 as to where observers are allowed to vote, if not registered at this centre. Officials were unsure of procedure and following demands from observers they allowed the names and registration numbers to be added to the list of voters.
- ❖ The record of seals was often misunderstood and not adhered to correctly. In a number of polling stations the seal numbers were scribbled onto bits of paper rather than filled in on the sheet. This also meant that observers had not been requested to sign for verification purposes. It led to instances such as at polling centre 14263, station number 4 whereby the

- two ballot boxes only had two seals on them. Had the correct form been used it would have drawn attention to the fact four seals should be used.
- ❖ Ink was not always used in the polling stations, and it was observed that most polling officials did not check for ink before allowing individuals to vote thereby rendering its use redundant.
 - ❖ Polling officials did not always seem to be aware of their exact duties – in polling centre 14329, station number 4 the box controller was observed listening to headphones which may have distracted him from his duties. In polling centre 14329 station number 10 staff were allowing up to ten voters into the room at any one time which caused confusion. Such overcrowding and confusion was also evident in polling centre 14360, station 3 which led to arguments and disruption of voting. Also within the same station a party representative was observed standing by the ballot boxes with two voter ID cards in their hands. No polling official seemed at all concerned by this.
 - ❖ Polling staff were found to be unaware of the procedure regarding assisted voting. In polling centre 14357 a police officer was observed helping two elderly voters to complete their ballot behind the curtain.
 - ❖ Officials were found in certain instances to have abandoned their own stations. This was problematic as it negatively affected the process of voting, caused confusion for voters and other staff members, and also meant materials were left unguarded. In polling centre 14230, at 8am the Box Controller was not in place, which meant that voter's fingers were not inked. Also in polling centre 14357 materials were left unguarded in a stairwell. Whilst not necessarily sensitive materials, they should have been stored securely so as not to expose NEC to any allegations of tampering.
 - ❖ In regards to the handling of ballot papers, polling officials were observed handling completed ballot papers before they were inserted into the boxes. In polling centre 14357, station number 4 this occurred when the Box Controller unfolded and refolded the ballot paper. This clearly infringes on the confidentiality of the voting procedure.
 - ❖ Only one polling centre out of ten actually checked the observers ID badge – this clearly undermined all attempts by NEC to ensure observers were properly accredited prior to the elections, and may have affected the overall security of the polling stations.

Counting of Votes

Two centres were observed for the counting of results – polling centre number 14357, and polling centre number 14230. At the former centre NEC officials are to be praised for their performance. Procedure was correctly adhered to, despite poor lighting. Limited electricity has obviously hampered NEC, however the torches provided to officials provided little effective lighting. Observers and party representatives were guided through each step of the counting procedure and every effort made to ensure that all steps were properly explained. Tallying was carried out accurately and no concerns noted by the observers at this centre.

In polling centre number 14230 however there were slight problems with the tallying of results. At one point observers had to highlight errors that had been made in the counting in order for the numbers to tally. This raised another concern which is the extent to which officials lacked confidence in their own decision-making and looked to observers for advice. Such behaviour may be misconstrued as manipulation of results by observers, both domestic and international.

Timing

In general timing seemed to be running a little later than seven am, however in all polling centres visited it had commenced before 8.30 am. Several aspects concerned IEMG in relation to timing:

- ❖ Materials at polling centre 14230 reportedly arrived at 5am however as no police were present they were then taken away again and not returned until almost 7am.
- ❖ Signs detailing exactly which station voters should go to were not displayed until after 7am in polling centre 14230. This resulted in great confusion within the queues which had been forming since around 3am.

Security

Security caused a number of concerns in the polling stations observed:

- ❖ Police were not present before voters arrived at many of the polling centres, for example at centre number 14230 the police only arrived after 6am. Queues had begun to form as early as 3am according to voters. Once again in polling centre 14329 it was reported that the police had not arrived until 6.30am.

- ❖ Whilst some polling centres definitely seemed controlled, in others there was clearly inadequate security to cope with the number of voters. In polling centre 14329, station numbers 6 – 10 were seriously understaffed with security, therefore creating confusion and at times chaos. Police did not always seem to be capable of controlling the voter queues. At station number 6 the queuing system was especially disorganised leading to aggression and overcrowding. Women with small children were clearly getting distressed. The police were doing very little to control this situation and at one point it was reported that a crowd had broken into the station itself.

Privacy of Elections

Whilst overall privacy did appear to be paramount in the polling centres observed an issue did arise concerning the conduct of the party representatives. In polling centre number 14242 party representatives were carrying parallel voter registration lists and also recording the names and registration numbers of each voter as they passed through the centre. This could be regarded as intimidating for voters and IEMG encourages NEC to ensure party representatives, and NEC officials, receive more training as to acceptable behaviour within the polling station. Also as previously discussed an issue arose as to assisted-voting whereby the same police officer assisted two voters, contrary to NEC Guidelines. It is important that officials are aware of these guidelines and adhere to them in order to protect the credibility of the election process.

Conduct of Political Parties

Generally the behaviour of party representatives was commended by IEMG. However this was not without exception and some incidences did arise which concerned IEMG, including the carrying of voter registration lists, and the taking of voter ID numbers. Also:

- ❖ In polling centre 14360 a number of incidences were noted concerning party representatives. In station number 3 arguments had arisen between the presiding officer and the party representatives which caused confusion and indeed led to a temporary halting of voting. The initial argument had arisen when one party representative from the APC was asked to leave as there were two party representatives in the station, contrary to NEC guidelines. Two party representatives from the PMDC were also encountered in the same station in polling centre 14328 however this caused no problems in this centre.

- ❖ In both polling centre number 14360, and also polling centre 14329, party representatives were going through the queues checking ID cards. Whilst IEMG recognises that this was done in an effort to organise the queues and limit confusion, we are concerned that it could be misconstrued as an act of intimidation by voters. Therefore security and polling officials only should be allowed to request voter ID cards, and move through the queues.

Electoral Malpractices

IEMG is concerned by the high number of invalidated polling stations across Sierra Leone – 477 in total. NEC is to be congratulated for conforming to international standards which state that polling stations can only be invalidated if it does not affect the overall result of the elections. However IEMG suggests that more explanation of the invalidation process should be given to the public, otherwise it may be misconstrued as NEC manipulating the results.

Civic Education

The people of Sierra Leone have clearly demonstrated their desire to vote and have a stake in their future at the ballot box, both in August and again in September. However results, and indeed behaviour during the election period, suggest that much more civic education is necessary in the run-up to the 2008 local elections. Concerns raised by observers included:

- ❖ A large number of voters required on the spot advice from NEC officials which demonstrates a lack of understanding about the election process.
- ❖ In the centres where counting was observed a large proportion of the invalidated votes were as a result of voters signing the ballot paper as opposed to marking it.
- ❖ Certain districts had a lower voter turnout and a higher margin of invalidated votes such as Koinadugu and Kambia. This suggests that certain areas were not appropriately targeted by NEC, NGOs and political parties in their voter education campaign.

The importance of civic education as a method of ensuring free, fair and transparent elections should not be underestimated by NEC.

Conclusions

Overall based on both the initial presidential and parliamentary elections, and also the subsequent run-off elections, IEMG concludes that the elections were carried out in a free and fair manner. The invalidation of 477 polling stations is an issue which must be addressed before the 2008 local elections. This also highlights the need for better training of officials and also education of voters in order to ensure equally free, fair and credible local elections.

Bar a few noted exceptions IEMG was generally impressed with the conduct of all stakeholders within the electoral process – NEC officials, the security, the political party representatives and also the public themselves. Based on the general comments made above, and indeed on the specific violations of electoral practices which have been mentioned IEMG would like to proffer the following recommendations:

Recommendations

- NEC officials must be instructed to wear ID and clothing throughout the day.
- All personnel, security and materials should be in place much earlier than the designated starting time of 7am. This will ensure prompt opening of polling stations and less confusion.
- Greater coordination between NEC and the SLP is necessary to ensure that when staff and materials arrive the security presence is appropriate.
- Signs instructing voters which station they should vote at should be in place the evening before the elections to ensure that as voters arrive they can immediately find which station they should be voting at.
- More training must be provided to NEC officials as to what the role of observers and party agents actually is, and where these individuals should be allowed to stand.
- More training and clearer procedures must be outlined to NEC officials concerning
 - Records of seals
 - Importance of remaining in their positions
 - Handling of ballot papers
 - Procedures for voting of officials and observers.
- The importance of applying ink to a voter's finger, and indeed checking for ink before allowing an individual to vote, must be stressed to all NEC officials.

- Party agents should receive greater training as to what their role is, and what is expected of them, during the elections. This will curb the potential for intimidation as was witnessed in several polling centres during our observations.
- Further emphasis must be given to both Polling Staff and Party Candidates to stress the importance of confidentiality.
- Arrangements should be made for adequate support staff at each centre for instances whereby staff either do not arrive or alternatively leave early.
- Intensive voter education in advance of the 2008 local elections will help avoid the need for polling officials to assist voters. This will protect the secrecy of the vote and reduce the risk of political interference.
- There were several checklists circulating amongst Party Members and Observers, all produced by their individual party or organisation. IEMG suggests that this practice be standardised and that NEC should produce its own checklist to be distributed to all accredited organisations and relevant parties to insure a higher standard of observation.
- IEMG suggests that in order to become an accredited Observer, a candidate must attend at least one training session in which a complete description of each aspect of the process should be given, along with a short handout.
- NEC must carry out a detailed review of these elections, inviting observers and party representatives to assist, in order to address any problems which have arisen in these 2007 elections.
- Further clarification and training must be given to future Polling Staff and security staff regarding assisted voting, detailing the following:
 - Only the disabled and illiterate are eligible for assisted voting. If a voter is simply confused and does not understand the process, then time must be taken outside of the voting booth to explain this to them.
 - The assistant must be a registered voter.
 - The assistant can only help one person to vote. If the police are repeatedly approached to give assistance, as occurred due to their position of trust, then a different officer must be used each time.
 - The Presiding Officer must note down the reason that the voter needs assistance. (In the case of Centre 14357 Station 02, this was not done).