



PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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PRELIMINARY DECLARATION

Introduction

The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and partners including Civil Society, State actors and the Media, managed the Sierra Leone 2018 Election Situation Room (ESR). The ESR focus is to observe threats to the peaceful conduct of the electioneering process and provide strategic responses to prevent and mitigate election related violence. The Situation Room, supported by the United States Agency for International Development in West Africa (USAID/WA), is part of a broader programme designed to mitigate election violence in West Africa through National Early Warning Systems (NEWS).

During the March 31, 2018 elections, the ESR gathered, collated and analysed reports on the electoral process from 500 local observers assigned to districts identified by NEWS hotspot mapping across the country. Based on the reports received and analysed, the following were the **key observations**:

1. 51% of the polling stations opened between 7:00am and 7:30am, 49% opened after 7:30am but before mid-day;

2. An initial low turnout of voters at some polling stations, but this improved as voting progressed;
3. 91.9% of the observers stated the presence/availability of NEC officials and agents at the opening of polls.
4. Cases of unstamped ballot papers in some polling stations (Constituency 117 in Western Urban);
5. Instance of security personnel removing NEC officials (2) allegedly involved in electoral malpractices;
6. Allegations of interference with the voting process by government functionaries at some polling stations in Bonthe, Kono and Western Urban;
7. Heavy military presence in areas such as Bonthe, Western Urban, Kambia and Kenema allegedly created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation;
8. Instance of accredited local National Election Watch (NEW) observers denied access to some polling stations in Tonkolili;
9. Incidents of violence and standoffs between party supporters in some areas in the Western Urban and Kono after the close of polls;
10. There was an allegation in Moyamba of pre-marked ballot papers in one candidate's favour;
11. Campaigning around some polling stations in Kono; and
12. Vehicles with concealed registration plates with or without accreditation were seen plying the roads (Aberdeen and Lumley).

General Security Observations

The WANEP Election Situation Room received media reports, and verified the following:

1. A gunshot was heard at Juba Hill, close to the residence of the opposition party (SLPP) Presidential candidate;
2. Two separate incidents of journalists beaten up by some ruling party members at Maffa Field, Lumley (Journalists concerned were: Patrick Jaiah Kamara of Concord Times Newspaper, and Ibrahim Samura of New Age Newspaper);
3. Incidents of intimidation of journalists;
4. A lawyer (Samuel U. B. Saffa) was assaulted by senior police officers at Lumley police station; and
5. There was interruption in reports received from observers as a result of nation-wide shut-down of internet service.

Interventions:

During the elections, the ESR Eminent persons were in close contact with the relevant stakeholders: ONS, NEC, SLP, Government Functionaries, Political Parties, International Election Observers and Civil Society Organisations to verify the incidents reported and to request for their timely intervention.

Additionally, we also maintained strong coordination with the ONS Situation Room, National Elections Watch Situation Room and the Women's Situation Room.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. We urge political parties to show maturity and leadership in the acceptance of the outcome of the elections;
2. Political parties to ensure that future elections are more focused on issues rather than personalities;

3. Political parties to build national cohesion and refrain from rhetorics that deepen divisiveness in the country;
4. We implore political parties to encourage their supporters to be law abiding and all Sierra Leoneans to be peaceful;
5. All EMBs should facilitate the review and amendments of policies and procedures to ensure that they are in tandem with international best practices;
6. We encourage Sierra Leoneans to cultivate patriotism and embrace civic responsibilities in the interest of national peace and security.
7. We encourage the security sector to review their policies on the engagement of the military during the electioneering process.

CONCLUSION

We acknowledge the role of the International Election Observation Missions and the Diplomatic Community for monitoring and observing the electoral processes in Sierra Leone.

We also applaud the efforts of the Election Management Bodies (EMBs) including the security sector, civil society organisations for their contribution towards a relatively peaceful run-off election.

We commend the two political parties in the presidential run-off election. However, we note with grave concern the various incidents of violence, mudslinging, hate speech and intimidation that marred the campaign period.

WANEP and its partners congratulate Sierra Leoneans for participating in the entire electioneering process. In this regard, WANEP urges the new administration to work towards reconciling aggrieved parties and strengthening ongoing efforts aimed at consolidating democratic governance and the peace, and upholding the nation's motto of Unity, Freedom and Justice.

God/Allah Bless us all!

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