



**Interim Statement by
His Excellency Baron Waqa,
Former President of Nauru,
Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group
Papua New Guinea National Election
25 July 2022**

Good morning and greetings to you all.

I am deeply honoured to present the Interim Statement of the Commonwealth Observer Group for the 2022 Papua New Guinea General Elections.

We are saddened by the escalation in election related violence and strongly condemn these acts of violence by a minority of the peaceful and law-abiding citizens of Papua New Guinea.

I acknowledge the electoral process is yet to be formally completed.

Our full assessment of the entire process will be contained in our final report, which will be made publicly available in due course.

Our Group is here at the invitation of the Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission. It was constituted by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, the Rt Hon Patricia Scotland QC.

Our presence here is testimony to the enduring relationship between the Commonwealth and the people of Papua New Guinea.

I am proud to mention, that the Commonwealth's first observation of an election, in the Pacific was held here, in Papua New Guinea in 1997.

I have been honoured to lead this team and to have directly engaged with so many communities in various walks of life.

I wish to start by acknowledging the Creator of this land and ocean, the wisdom of the elders, and the ancestors of Papua New Guinea who walked and worked this country for centuries.

I also wish to acknowledge the rich diversity and history of this country, the work of successive governments and the generous hospitality of the people.

We have been here since 28 June, and our Group is comprised of political, electoral, media, gender, and civil society experts from Commonwealth countries, mainly from the Pacific.

We were briefed by a wide range of stakeholders from the government, civil society, and local communities, as well as other observers.

We conducted observation in many polling places across all four regions of the country.

We met voters, polling officials, political parties, security personnel, civil society, and scrutineers.

This helped us build a broad understanding and appreciation of the electoral process on the ground.

We commend the voters of Papua New Guinea for their enthusiasm to exercise their democratic rights in choosing their political leaders.

We also commend the Electoral Commission, polling staff, political parties, candidates, scrutineers, security personnel and all others for their respective roles during this election.

KEY FINDINGS

I will now go into the key findings of the Group, and I will begin by highlighting a number of positive aspects of the election.

We commend Papua New Guinea for conducting its ninth election notwithstanding the institutional challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We also acknowledge the Electoral Commission for enhancing the participation of women in the electoral process, as polling officials, and through its ongoing commitment to its gender-split voting policy.

We also recognise the Commission's policies to facilitate assisted voting for Persons with Disability, and other disadvantaged groups.

We commend the determination and patience of voters to exercise their right to vote, despite the widespread delays in delivering the election.

We acknowledge the professional manner in which the police managed potential security challenges at many polling locations.

We commend the media for its widespread coverage of the elections, including the government's special budgetary allocation to the national broadcaster.

We note that the Electoral Commission faced considerable challenges in delivering this election.

However, as Observers, it is our responsibility to identify challenges to the inclusiveness, credibility, and transparency of this election.

We do this with the aim of supporting and strengthening the electoral process in Papua New Guinea.

Some of the key issues of concern we observed include the following:

- The highly centralised structure of the Electoral Commission presents many overwhelming challenges in the effective delivery of the election.
- The 2022 rolls were missing a large number of names, in some cases, as much as 50 percent of eligible voters were reportedly not on the rolls. There was also widespread public dissatisfaction with the accuracy of the common roll.
- We are concerned that this could have disenfranchised high numbers of eligible voters.

- The late and insufficient disbursement of funds, unpaid bills and allowances from previous elections, created a lack of trust in the Commission by suppliers. This impacted the timely and safe conduct of this election.
- Numerous allegations of bribery and treating involving candidates' agents. We also witnessed the distribution of money and food to voters during the polling period.
- Inadequate efforts to facilitate the inclusion and participation of women, youth, Persons with Disability, and other disadvantaged groups in the political and electoral process.
- Lack of media access to the Electoral Commission and an absence of updates on its website and social media channels, fuelling possible misinformation.

Recommendations

Our report will include a well-considered set of recommendations to address the challenges identified. These include:

- All relevant stakeholders to collaborate in undertaking an urgent review of the 2022 election.
- Immediate reforms to strengthen voter registration including the introduction of continuous voter registration and capacity building at all levels.
- Reform the Electoral Commission to create a collaborative and decentralised structure that would ensure accountability and transparency and the effective delivery of elections, in line with good international practice.
- The Electoral Commission to partner with key stakeholders, including civil society and the media, to establish a national network to support voter education and participation as well as electoral monitoring.
- The Government to release sufficient funding to the Electoral Commission, on an annual basis, to effectively carry out its duties over the electoral cycle.

I am pleased to report that the 2022 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, reiterated its commitment to the Commonwealth's 2018 Revised Guidelines for the conduct of electoral observation. These call for the establishment of domestic mechanisms to take forward prospective reforms proposed by observers. I would therefore encourage due consideration for our recommendations, once our Final Report has been released.

Before I conclude, I reiterate my grave concern and sadness at the daily incidents of violence and tragic loss of lives reported in mainstream media, social media, and from other observer teams.

On behalf of my team, and the wider Commonwealth, our deepest condolences, go out to the families of those who have lost loved ones.

We support and join calls for peace by church and community leaders.

As we prepare to depart the shores of this beautiful country, let me say how deeply moved we are by the aspirations of the people for a better Papua New Guinea.

We stand in solidarity with you in your journey.

God Bless Papua New Guinea.

The Commonwealth Observer Group members are:

- **H.E. Baron Divavesi Waqa** - Chairperson, Former President of Nauru
- **Dr Nicole George**, University Lecturer and Researcher The University of Queensland, Australia
- **Ms Makereta Komaidrue**, Editor, Pacific Islands News Association, Fiji
- **Dame Winifred Laban**, Assistant Vice-Chancellor (Pasifika), Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

- **Ms Makereta Vaelua**, Deputy Returning Officer (DRO), Electoral Commission of Samoa, Samoa
- **Mr Hendrick Gappy**, Former Chairman, Seychelles Electoral Commission, Seychelles
- **Mr Johnson Honimae**, Chief Executive Office, Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC), Solomon Islands
- **Ms Emeline Siale Ilolahia**, Executive Director, Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (PIANGO), Tonga
- **Mr Wilson Toa**, Country Manager, Vanuatu Balance of Power, Vanuatu