

# Introduction

Following receipt of a request from the President of Guyana, HE Mr Samuel Hinds, for a Commonwealth presence at his country's General and Regional Elections scheduled for 15 December 1997, the Commonwealth Secretary-General sent an Assessment Mission, comprising three Secretariat officials, to Guyana to establish whether the major political parties would welcome Commonwealth observers. The Assessment Mission visited Guyana from 12-18 October and met with the Elections Commission, the main political parties and other interested groups. It confirmed that there was broad support within Guyana for the presence of Commonwealth observers.

## The Observer Group and its Terms of Reference

This was the twenty-third Commonwealth Observer Group to have been constituted by the Commonwealth Secretary-General since the October 1989 meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The context for the Secretary-General's positive response was set by Commonwealth commitment to the promotion of fundamental political values set out in the 1991 Harare Commonwealth Declaration and reinforced by Commonwealth Heads of Government in their Millbrook Commonwealth Action Programme on the Harare Declaration, adopted at their meeting in New Zealand in 1995.

It was in this context that the Secretary-General invited our Group of 14 Observers, supported by eight staff from the Commonwealth Secretariat, to observe the 1997 General and Regional Elections in Guyana. The composition of the Group, which was led by HE Mr Ali Hassan Mwinyi, is set out at *Annex I*. The terms of reference for our Group were incorporated in the Secretary-General's letter inviting each of us to participate in the mission and were as follows:

The Group is established by the Commonwealth Secretary-General at the request of the Government of Guyana and supported by the major political parties. It is to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the elections in accordance with the law of Guyana. It is to consider the various factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole and to determine in its own judgment whether the conditions exist for a free expression of will by the electors and if the result of the elections reflects the wishes of the people.

The Group is to act impartially and independently. It has no executive role; its function is not to supervise but to observe the process as a whole and to form a judgment accordingly. It would also be free to propose to the authorities concerned such action on institutional, procedural and other matters as would assist the holding of the elections.

The Group is to submit its report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, who will forward it to the Government of Guyana, to the leadership of the political parties taking part in the elections and thereafter to all Commonwealth governments.

The Secretary-General's announcement of our mission on 24 November 1997 is at *Annex II*.

## Method of Work

We assembled in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, on 6 December 1997 and were briefed by the leader of the Secretariat team, Mr Carl Dundas, on 7 December prior to our departure for Guyana. We arrived in Georgetown later that evening and the following day issued an Arrival Statement at a press conference (*Annex III*).

On 8 December we began a series of meetings in Georgetown with the Elections Commission, representatives of the main political parties contesting the elections, non-governmental organisations

(NGOs), representatives of the Amerindian community, media organisations, representatives of professional organisations, women's groups and other international observers. On Wednesday 10 December, our Chairperson and some members of our Group met for a second time with the Chairman of the Elections Commission to make known to the Commission representations made to us and to seek clarification of some of the points which had been raised during our earlier meetings. On Thursday 11 December, our Chairperson and some members of our Group who had not yet been deployed met with Commonwealth High Commissioners accredited to Guyana. Our Schedule of Engagements is at *Annex IV*.

On Wednesday 10 December 1997 we observed the voting of the Disciplined Forces at 18 polling centres in Regions 3 and 4 (see *Annex V*). On 11 December, we divided into 10 two-person teams and were deployed to all 10 regions in Guyana (see *Annex VI*). Our discussions at regional and local levels were of a similar nature, though necessarily more limited in scope, to those held in Georgetown and provided an overview of the political situation and the state of electoral preparedness. We had direct access to the voters, an experience which proved to be beneficial to all of us. All teams travelled extensively throughout their designated regions in order to familiarise themselves with local conditions, assess the state of preparedness for the poll and observe the last days of the campaign. Those teams which were able to do so submitted daily reports of their observations to the Observer Group's Chairperson.

Between 11-14 December our Chairperson and the leader of the Secretariat team travelled widely in Georgetown and its environs and also visited Regions 1, 5, 6 and 10 to assess first hand the state of electoral preparedness in those regions. While there, they met with regional election officials and spoke with members of the public.

On polling day we observed voting at approximately 342 polling stations across the country. We also observed the count at 20 polling stations. During our visits to polling stations we spoke to election officials, party representatives, international and local observers, security personnel and voters themselves. During our deployment we were assisted by Observation Notes and Check Lists (see examples at *Annex VII*). On the basis of our reports during deployment, our Chairperson issued an Interim Statement at 11 a.m. on 16 December 1997. A copy of this statement appears at *Annex VIII*.

Our Group reassembled in Georgetown on 16 December 1997 for a debriefing and to finalise our Report. We departed Guyana on 20 December 1997 (see *Departure Statement at Annex IX*).