

Conclusion

In our Interim Statement we said that no elections could have been held under more trying circumstances. The five-year old rebel war cast a long shadow over every aspect of the elections. It displaced half the population of Sierra Leone, driving some into refugee camps in neighbouring Guinea and Liberia and many others into the urban centres of the country. The resulting general insecurity meant that voter registration, civic education, party campaigns and other activities associated with the elections were confined for the most part to the relative safety of Freetown and the other urban centres of the country. This was a major limitation which the ongoing war imposed on the electoral exercise.

Even before the elections, the war had made road transport outside the Western Area unsafe, especially in the Eastern and Southern provinces. The determination of the rebel RUF to disrupt the elections made the transportation of voting materials by road even more difficult. The Interim National Electoral Commission had very few trucks of its own and relied on the use of air transport (helicopters and fixed wing aircraft) to transport voting kits to the various provincial centres. In the event, the helicopters were grounded on 23 February 1996 – three days before polling. When eventually they did resume flying, the voting materials arrived at their destinations late and in at least one verified instance, those meant for one area were sent to another. The logistical and organisational difficulties disrupted the elections for the 12 reserved seats for Paramount Chiefs which were to have been held on 24 February 1996 and accounted for the delays in the opening of many polling stations on 26 February.

INEC worked with commendable assiduity to deliver a credible election. But from the very beginning, the odds seemed to be against such an outcome. The prevailing circumstances in the country sometimes made it impracticable for INEC to achieve some of its objectives within the time-frame initially set. This was particularly evident in voter registration. Voter registration began shortly before Christmas 1995 and was scheduled to end on 31 January 1996. It was necessary, however, to extend the registration period, with the result that registration of voters continued till the eve of poll. And even then not every qualified voter was able to register. We encountered a number of people at the polling stations who wanted to know whether there was provision for them to register and vote there and then.

The odds in the way of the elections were compounded by the uncertainty arising from the campaign for 'peace before elections' launched in the middle of January 1996 and not ended until the National Consultative Conference reconvened on 12 February 1996 and decided overwhelmingly that the elections should be held on 26 February 1996 as planned. We believe that that campaign and the resulting uncertainty took away some of the momentum in the preparations for the elections.

Some have argued that a further three or four months would have placed INEC on an even better footing to conduct the elections. Perhaps, but that must now remain a matter for speculation. What is not for speculation is that complete INEC independence and greater resources would have been of immense assistance. A Chief Elections Officer would have helped to reduce some of the technical difficulties which beset the elections.

Consequently, these elections, under the given circumstances, were nothing short of an act of faith on the part of the people of Sierra Leone. They were the first truly democratic elections in nearly 30 years. For the citizen voters in the queues, these elections were more than an opportunity to replace a military regime with a democratically elected and accountable government. They saw them as an historic watershed, the one opportunity to make a new beginning; and judging by the impressive voter turnout, they intended to seize that opportunity with both hands.

The new beginning was already evident in the campaign. Previous elections in Sierra Leone had been characterised by widespread intimidation and violence, including the kidnapping and detention of political opponents. These Presidential and Parliamentary elections marked a decisive break with that past. The mood of the voters in the queues was

one of tolerance, good humour and enormous patience. We are convinced that all those registered voters wishing to exercise their franchise had an opportunity to do so free of manipulation.

The Presiding Officers and polling assistants worked assiduously to ensure transparency. They tended to follow the procedures and regulations to the letter. This inevitably slowed down the rate at which voters were being processed. The inexperience of some of the polling officers coupled with the need to explain the voting procedures to illiterate voters further slowed down progress in the polling stations. But what was lost in speed was made up for in the integrity and transparency of the process.

All in all, the people of Sierra Leone have risen to an historic challenge and carried the day for democracy. But it remains a fragile achievement. The rebel war has practically brought the economy of the country to a standstill. In many rural communities, especially in the Southern and Eastern provinces, the population is being subjected to extreme barbarities. If Sierra Leone's hard won democracy is to have a chance of putting down roots, the war must be brought to a speedy end. The Commonwealth, indeed, the entire international community must continue to do everything possible to end this tragedy.

The RUF consistently and publicly opposed the holding of the elections; but it was by no means the only group opposed to them. Other armed elements were similarly opposed to the transition and may well exploit every opportunity to destabilise and discredit the new democratic order. We believe the Commonwealth and the wider international community can play an important role in consolidating Sierra Leone's fledgling democracy. The institutions of democracy will need to be built up almost from scratch. The Commonwealth can help in this through technical assistance and by engaging the full range of Commonwealth institutions in support of democracy in Sierra Leone.

In the Commonwealth context, the outcome of these elections represents yet another triumph for one of its most cherished fundamental political values. The need now is for the Commonwealth to help the incoming democratically elected Government of Sierra Leone to make democracy a permanent reality in the country. We believe the Commonwealth must rise to this challenge.

Acknowledgements

We wish to put on record our thanks to the many people who helped us during our mission and to express our particular thanks to the Chairman of the Interim National Electoral Commission (INEC), Dr James Jonah, and his colleagues, whose assistance was invaluable.

We also wish to express our appreciation to the political parties, religious bodies, non-governmental organisations, representatives of the media and members of the diplomatic corps in Freetown for their generosity with their time and attention, and to thank the other election observers – those belonging to the Joint International Observer Group, co-ordinated by the United Nations, and the domestic observers co-ordinated by the Council of Churches of Sierra Leone – for their co-operation.

Special thanks must go to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, for his guidance and for giving us this opportunity to serve the people of Sierra Leone and the cause of democracy. We would also like to thank the members of the Secretariat staff team for their efficiency and support in often very difficult circumstances.

Finally, and most of all, we wish to express our deep appreciation to the people of Sierra Leone for the warmth of their welcome and hospitality extended to us during our mission and to record our admiration for their dignity, courage and above all their remarkable determination to secure a democratic civilian government for their country.