

Introduction

In May 1997 the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, received a request from the Acting Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Hon John Giheno MP, to establish a Commonwealth Observer Group to observe his country's fifth General Election. The elections had been called in April and would be held between 14 and 28 June 1997. This was the first time that the Government of Papua New Guinea had invited Commonwealth or other international observers to observe a general election.

In line with established practice, the Secretary-General sent an Assessment Mission of three Commonwealth Secretariat officials to Papua New Guinea to establish whether the major political parties would welcome Commonwealth observers. The Assessment Mission visited Papua New Guinea between 19 and 23 May 1997 and met representatives of the Electoral Commission, the main political parties and non-governmental organisations. It subsequently reported to the Secretary-General that there was broad support for the presence of Commonwealth Observers.

The Observer Group and its Terms of Reference

This was the twenty-second 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. That meeting had agreed that member countries could benefit from the sending of Election Observers as a means of strengthening democratic processes and institutions. This view was reaffirmed by Heads of Government at their meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe, in October 1991, where it was reflected in the historic Harare Commonwealth Declaration, and at subsequent meetings of Heads of Government.

It was against this background that the Secretary-General invited our Group of ten Observers, supported by eight members of staff from the Commonwealth Secretariat, to observe the general election in Papua New Guinea. The composition of the Group, which was led by Sir Robin Gray, 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 Papua New Guinea and supported by all the major political parties. It is to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the election in accordance with the law of Papua New Guinea. 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 election 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 be free to propose to the government and other concerned authorities such action on institutional, procedural and other matters as would assist the holding of the election and thereafter, the effective functioning of the elected government.

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

The Secretary-General's announcement of our mission on 3 June 1997 is at *Annex II*.

Method of Work

We were briefed in Singapore on 5 June 1997 by the Commonwealth Deputy Secretary-General (Political), Mr K Srinivasan. We arrived in Papua New Guinea the following day and held a press conference in the capital, Port Moresby, at which we issued the Arrival Statement attached at *Annex III*.

On 7 June 1997 we began a series of meetings in Port Moresby with the Electoral Commissioner and his colleagues, the police, senior representatives of political parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media organisations, the business community, women's groups and Commonwealth High Commissions. These meetings provided a valuable opportunity to be briefed on the preparations for and background to the general election. It also enabled us to explain our mandate and the way in which we intended to conduct our observation. Our Schedule of Engagements is at *Annex IV*.

We divided our Group into eight two-person teams. Seven of these were deployed on 10 and 11 June and were based in key provincial capitals – Port Moresby, Lae, Mount Hagen, Goroka, Rabaul, Madang, Wewak – from which it was intended that they should cover their own and neighbouring provinces. The eighth, consisting of the Chairperson and Staff Team Leader, was based in Port Moresby but roved across the country, including to North Solomons Province (which includes the island of Bougainville). Altogether these teams were able to cover 18 of the country's 20 provinces. Details of our deployment are at *Annex V*. Two members of the Group's support staff remained in Port Moresby to support and maintain communication with the teams in the field.

Our teams were briefed on arrival in the provinces by officials of the Electoral Commission and the police. They subsequently met candidates, political parties and others, in an exercise parallel to that conducted earlier in Port Moresby. All teams travelled extensively before and during the election period, and submitted daily reports of their observations to the Observer Group's Chairperson.

In some places the elections were held on one or two days, in others over the whole two-week period. Our teams observed the poll at as many polling stations (known in Papua New Guinea as polling booths) as possible, witnessing the opening procedures and polling and ending with scrutiny of the counting and tallying process. Altogether, our teams visited 321 polling booths in 66 electorates and observed 17 counts, once more meeting election officials and party representatives, but also speaking to the voters themselves. During our deployment we were assisted by Observation Notes and Check Lists (see examples at *Annexes VI* and *VII*).

Our Group reassembled in Port Moresby on 26 June 1997 for a debriefing and to finalise our Report. We departed from Port Moresby from 1 July 1997 (see Departure Statement at *Annex VIII*).