Preliminary Election Observation Report on the Sierra Leone General Election that was held on Saturday 24th June 2023

Background of the election observation.

Following the g7+ (group of Seven Plus) institutionalized the election observation initiative as part of its peer learning and sharing of experience under its flagship program ‘Fragile to Fragile’ cooperation on 22 March 2023 in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The g7+, as an Inter-Governmental organization of conflict affected countries that helps achieving Peace, and stability through peer learning, is already contributing to good governance, peace, development, and democratic space in member countries, for instance, Timor-Leste’s cooperation in Guinea Bissau and Sao Tome and Principe. Elections are among the most important phases in the trajectory of g7+ countries. They are milestones that determine chances of stability and peace. In line with the vision of the g7+,
the members have inspiring lessons to learn from each other. Hence, the key objectives of this initiative amongst others include:

- Sharing of experiences in managing elections;
- Contributing to enhancing democratic consolidation, strengthening peace and development through election observation amongst g7+ members;
- Enhancing to improve Election Management Bodies (EMB) operations through its election observation recommendations;

Introduction

The g7+ Election Observation Mission (EOM) comprising of members accredited by ECSL to observe the general Election in Sierra Leone on 24th June 2023. The EOM took place during 20-25 June 2023. The members of the mission comprised of:

1. Mr. Habib Urrehman Mayar (Head of Delegation)
   Deputy General Secretary of g7+
2. Mr. Domingos Barreto
   Vice President of National Election Commission of Timor-Leste
3. Mr. Michael E. Clarke
   Deputy Director of Monitoring and Evaluation, National Election Commission of Liberia
4. Mr. Felix Piedade
   Chief Operating Officer of g7+

The g7+ EOM observed the process from a standpoint of impartiality, independence, professionalism and objectivity which are in tandem with international best practices of election observation the world over.

It is also important to underscore that the g7+ EOM observed general election within the confines of the electoral legal stipulation of Sierra Leone in reference to “guidelines and code of conduct for observer groups”

Prior to polling, the g7+ EOM also had consultative engagements with the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL) to enhance understanding on certain election procedures and to have a comprehensive knowledge on general preparations and effective collaboration of relevant stakeholders in the electoral process. The EOM also met the Political Parties Regulation Commission (PPRC)

The composition of the g7+ EOM on polling day was made up of 2 teams of 2 members each observing a total of 25 polling centers in Rural and Urban Western regions. The methodology adopted for polling day observation was a checklist enabling the teams to observe opening, polling, closure and counting procedures and the general political environment at polling stations.

A. Pre – Election
1. The g7+ EOM upon its arrival observed that a rally by Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) was held in Freetown which was peaceful.

2. Prior to the elections, tension escalated when All Peoples Congress (APC) called on its members and supporters to protest the “refusal of the ECSL to implement its recommendations to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections”.

3. The EOM joined Peace March was organized by the Political Party Regulatory Commission (PPRC) on 23rd of June that called for non-violent and peaceful election. The Peace March could have been well attended with the participation of Civil society organizations.

4. The ECSL organized regular press conferences to share updates in regard to preparation for the Election.

B. The Polling Process

i. Opening of polls

5. The g7+ EOM observed that most polling officials were knowledgeable on opening procedures. The ballot boxes were sealed in the presence of the party agents and observers who were invited to note the seal numbers. However, there were few who faced challenges in sealing of the boxes.

6. The number of ballot papers received were also shared with the party agents and observers present at the polling stations before the start of the polls.

7. The g7+ EOM observed in polling stations the presence of national and international observers, media outlets, during the opening of polls at the polling stations visited.

8. Polling stations that the g7+ EOM visited did not open in time. There were delays that caused frustration among the voters.
9. The EOM noted that the delay was caused by the late arrival of the voting materials.

ii. Polling

10. The polling staff and security personnel at the polling stations visited were very cooperative and helpful with the observers. The Polling Center Managers (PCM) were responsive to questions by observers.

11. Queues at polling stations observed were largely peaceful and voters to a greater degree were knowledgeable about the voting process. However, there were some tensions at some stations where voters were struggling to enter the polling stations. This was due to the crowd and long ques. At one polling center that the g7+ EOM visited, the voters had difficulty in entering and even witnessed few female voters who were fainted.

12. Polling staff deployed at most centers were not uniformed and hence not easily identified. Some of them did not even have display of their ID cards.

13. It was observed that ballot paper controllers at most polling stations guided the voters in a professional and impartial manner to cast their votes. The g7+ EOM notes that this strategy is an effective tool to minimizing invalid votes and therefore commends ECSL.

14. Assistant to voters with special need was given whenever necessary at polling stations observed.

15. Polling station layouts were generally conducive with the exception of some with poor lighting conditions, ventilation and access especially for persons with disabilities. In some polling stations, the g7+ EOM observed that the voting booths were organized in a way that that voters could see and notice each other.

16. During the polling at some stations visited, some party agents were domineering and overbearing tried to put aside the center manager and presiding officers.

17. Few voters at few stations visited could not be verified due to the lack of their details in the voting register.

iii. Closure and Counting
18. The period of delay in the opening of the polls was not allotted to extend the closing period at some polling stations.

19. Votes were counted in full view of party agents, observers, and security personnel.

20. Counting procedures were largely followed except for some challenges in few stations where the presiding officers had to be corrected by either party agents and/or center manager.

21. It was observed that the counting at the stations visited was done without major incidents.

22. Provisional results at polling stations observed were recorded on polling station forms, verified and signed by party agents and copies issued to them.

IV. The Political Environment

23. The g7+ EOM of observed that the overall political environment around all polling stations was serene friendly and free from political violence, intimidation and influence.

C. Recommendations

A primary objective of the g7+ EOM is to help improve election management through its recommendations and it is encouraged that the responsible institutions consider the following recommendations:

Pre-Election

24. Considering the fragility of the country and the nature of elections, a contest for a prize, political parties should exercise restraints in making pronouncements which maybe interrupted by supporters but rather continue to take advantage of the space created for dialogue. Despite what ensued, the g7+ is grateful that both the opposition and ruling parties quickly took measures to restore peace and the voters’ confidence in peaceful elections. In particular, the signing of the “The Sierra Leone Election Pledge” by all political parties is encouraging.

25. The g7+ EOM appreciated the initiative of the PPRC to have a peace march but was concerned of the absence of stakeholders such as civil society organizations (CSOs) particularly. CSOs represents the interest of the ordinary citizens and as such since should have mobilized its members and the citizenry to join the march. This in our view would have been the united voice of ordinary Sierra Leoneans demanding the political parties adhere to the peace pledge.
26. The regular updates by ECSL on the preparation for election through press conferences is worth commending.

**Elections Day**

27. The lack of dress code of poll workers not being uniformed made it difficult to easily be identified. Voters did not know whom to quickly get to for assistance. The g7+ EOM strongly recommend that a dress code be strictly followed by the polling officials.

28. Logisticians of the ECSL need to be more meticulous in the deployment of elections materials by referencing their check lists or a final check to ensure all the materials required are sent to the polling centers in time. Also, polling staff should arrange the centers at least 24 hours before polling begins and so to start the opening procedures on time as per the law. The timely opening of the polling centers will not only help in increasing the voters’ turnout but will also enhance the confidence of voters.

29. Considering the challenges faced in finding ideal locations for polling centers, there is a need to begin conversations on how to manage these challenges of queue management or engage with other EMBs to see how this issue is handled.

30. The delay in opening of the polls after the official opening time should be compensated for by extending the time of closing and not be discretionary.

31. Party agents must abide by the guidelines and not act outside of it. In particular, they should be strictly guided not to touch the sensitive materials.

32. Polling staff, particularly POs should follow the laid out procedures which are intended to improve efficiency and enhance transparency. The g7+ EOM further recommends for an improvement in polling official training.

**D. Conclusion**

33. The g7+ EOM reiterates that this is an initial assessment of the electoral process for the June 24th June General Election and therefore solicit the continuous cooperation of all political parties and state actors in Sierra Leone.