

## Guidelines for Commonwealth Observers

### 1. The Role and Responsibilities of a Commonwealth Observer

#### □ **The Commonwealth Selection Process**

The Commonwealth selects observers based on a number of factors. First, it selects people who are knowledgeable in a relevant area. Observers include: politicians, election officials, representatives from civil society, the media and the civil service. Second, the Commonwealth chooses eminent people who have made a significant contribution in their own field. Third, the Commonwealth selects people from all of its democratic member countries, thereby reflecting a wide range of political experiences. While, you will receive no specific training to be a Commonwealth observer, you will receive an intensive briefing in the country prior to deployment.

As an observer you should also be aware of the physical requirements expected of you before departure. You are responsible for ensuring you are able to be a full and active member of the team. Check what is expected of you before you accept the invitation.

#### □ **The Commonwealth Reputation**

While the Commonwealth has undertaken election observation on an ad hoc basis since 1964, it is only since 1990 that it has been a key part of the democracy building work of the organisation. Given a mandate from the Heads of Government in 1990 at Kuala Lumpur, which was reinforced in the 1991 Harare Declaration, the Commonwealth today sees election observation as one of its flagship activities. Within member countries, the Commonwealth is seen as an independent and impartial organisation.

#### □ **Why and How the Commonwealth Gets Involved**

According to the Heads of Government Guidelines (1991), the Commonwealth Secretariat only sends an observer team in response to an invitation from the host government. Following the receipt of an invitation, the Secretary-General sends an assessment team to the country to examine the extent to which all parties support the presence of a Commonwealth Observer Group at the election. The assessment team also examines whether the conditions exist for an election to take place. If their assessment is positive, the invitation is formally accepted and an observer team is formed and deployed.

#### □ **Role of a Commonwealth Observer**

It is fundamental that, as a Commonwealth observer, you do not intervene in any of the electoral processes. Your principal job is to observe the process and record any discrepancies.

□ **Responsibilities of an Observer**

As a Commonwealth observer you are responsible for providing an impartial and independent judgement of the electoral process. You are neither a representative of your government nor your organisation and neither are you a representative of the Commonwealth Secretariat. You are the independent voice of the Commonwealth and it is precisely this impartiality which has contributed to the reputation of Commonwealth Observer Groups.

As an observer you need to participate as an active team member. The success of a Commonwealth Observer Group is based on a commitment to co-operating with each other. This is especially important given you will need to work closely together to write your observer report following election day.

## **2. The Mandate of the Observer Mission**

□ **Terms of Reference Explained**

The Commonwealth, like many other international and domestic observer groups, no longer uses the term 'free and fair'. It has long been recognised that no election is ever totally free and fair. Instead, the Commonwealth uses the following key terms:

'It is to consider the various factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole and to determine in its own judgement whether the conditions exist for a free expression of will by the electors and if the results of the election reflect the wishes of the people.'

The various factors to consider include: the electoral legal framework, the media, the campaign as well as an examination of the process on election day. Discussions by the group members are held following election day and the decisions made will be reflected in the statement and the Commonwealth Observer Group report.

## **3. Pre-Departure preparation**

In order to ensure you are as fully prepared for your task as possible, we recommend you undertake the following steps.

□ **Request relevant country information from the Commonwealth Secretariat.**

Useful information you could request includes: previous observer reports on the country, a political background of the country,

information on any other assistance the Commonwealth has provided to the country, information on other observer groups (international and domestic).

- **Undertake your own background research on the country.**  
Find material on the country which can help you understand the context within which the election takes place. Ask the Secretariat if they have any references. If you can, access the Internet to find out about the current political situation in the country you are going to.
- **Practical Assistance and Advice**  
Check on vaccination and health warnings for the country concerned and ensure you take the correct medication. Check whether you will need any specific equipment - first aid kit, torch, etc. Before leaving, obtain a small amount of currency that is readily acceptable in the country concerned.

#### **4. Staffing of the Mission**

- **Role of the Secretariat Staff Team**  
Each observer mission will have staff from the Secretariat who are responsible for providing the administrative and logistical support to the Observer Group. It is important to be clear about the specific roles and functions of the individual staff members on the team.
- **Contact with Staff Team**  
You will be provided with the contact details of the staff team while you are in the capital and once you have been deployed. If you have any questions or concerns, it is important that you contact the staff team members. They have the experience of previous Commonwealth observer missions and they are there to assist you.

#### **5. Observer Role in Country**

##### **5.1. Arrival Procedures**

- **Press Conference on Arrival**  
It is important for the citizens of the host country to know that the Commonwealth Observer Group has arrived and to hear its mandate, the composition of the team and schedule of work. A press release (known as an arrival statement) is read out at the press conference by the Chair of the Group, who then proceeds to take questions from the media. Throughout the visit, observers should direct any media questions to their Chairperson who speaks on behalf of the Observer Group.

- **Receptions**

It is quite possible that, as observers, you will be invited to receptions hosted by the Commonwealth or held by Commonwealth High Commissioners. This provides a good opportunity for you to meet with other observers, representatives of civil society and the media. Remember that you are representatives of the Commonwealth.

## **5.2. Briefing in the Capital**

- **Meetings**

The first few days of the observer mission are spent in the capital city being fully briefed on the current election process and political situation. Meetings are held with many different organisations including: political parties, observer groups, election commissions, the media, civil society organisations (women's organisations, Indigenous Peoples, Human Rights Groups, etc) police and High Commissioners.

- **Questions you should think about**

As observers, this is your main opportunity to find out as much as possible about the current situation. It is from these bodies that you will hear about possible problems on election day. You can find out about the role of the political parties, to what extent policing has impacted on the process, whether the election commission has performed efficiently and so on. Try and prepare questions in advance of the sessions so that you maximise your opportunity to hear about potential problems.

- **Be familiar with election day procedures**

The Commonwealth Secretariat will supply you with the necessary electoral laws for the country. Try and find time to read this important information and ask questions if anything is unclear. Ensure that over the course of your meetings you have been given clear instructions on the precise procedures that should be followed by election officials and citizens on election day.

- **Working with your Colleagues**

You will have been selected to be a Commonwealth observer because of the special skills you have developed through your working life. Your Observer Group will have been created on the basis that between you all the necessary skills and experience will exist. In order to ensure the Observer Group performs to the best of its collective ability you need to develop positive working relationships with your colleagues. Take full advantage of the opportunity to learn from your colleagues about political or electoral matters.

- **Media Monitoring**  
Media monitoring is part of the approach of the Commonwealth Observer Group. As an Observer make sure you watch, read and listen to as much of the media coverage as possible. Seek guidance from the Secretariat staff about this when you are in the capital.

### 5.3. Deployment

- **The Deployment Process**  
Having received a briefing in the capital, you will then be deployed to your region of the country to undertake election observation. A certain number of observers will remain in the capital to observe the poll there. Two individuals will be deployed together, and the pairing will consist of either two observers, or one observer and a Secretariat staff team member. The staff will try and ensure you are matched with someone who has different skills and knowledge to your own. The reasoning behind this approach is that together you will have a more comprehensive view of the various processes (political and electoral) that are occurring on the final days of the campaign and on election day.

The practical aspects of your deployment will have been worked out as far as possible by the Secretariat staff. You will receive a per diem before you leave for deployment.

- **Planning your Local Pre-Election Briefings**  
Your aim in the period before election day is to find out as much as possible about the issues in the area where you have been deployed. Arrange meetings with the local election administrator, political parties, the police and any local non-governmental organisations. Make sure you introduce yourselves to the key, relevant people in the area.
- **Questions to ask in your area**  
One of your main aims is to ensure that during the pre-election day period you identify the factors which might already have had, or will have, an impact on the electoral process. These include any allegations of violence, intimidation, fraud, biased allocations of resources, etc. Report this information back to central headquarters on a daily basis. Make sure that you have canvassed opinions from a wide range of sources as to where problems might arise on election day. In this way you can ensure you are as prepared for election day as possible.
- **Working with other Observer groups**  
Find out if there are any domestic or international observer groups operating in your region. Arrange meetings to discuss issues of

concern. Talk through your deployment strategy to ensure that you have a level of co-ordination rather than arriving at the same polling station at the same time.

□ **Cover your Area**

Try as far as possible to cover your region. Try to have as broad a coverage as possible during the few days before election day. This will not only alert potential troublemakers to your presence but it will also give confidence to the voters. Remember, only you, your partner and your driver know the areas you will be covering on election day. Others can only guess your route and when you will appear.

□ **Have a Dry Run**

Work out a route for election day in conjunction with your driver. How many polling stations you can cover depends both on the geography of the area and the nature of the problems which have been brought to your attention in the preceding few days. If possible, it is strongly recommended that you have a dry run of your route the day before the election. This will allow you to make an accurate assessment of your route.

#### **5.4. Election Day Observation**

□ **Practical Arrangements**

Make sure you have arranged a first aid kit, adequate food and drink for you and your driver and a mobile phone. You need to ensure you have a contact phone number for the central headquarters in case you need to contact Secretariat staff.

□ **Opening of the Poll**

Make sure you arrive before the poll opens. Co-ordinate arrangements with your driver and remember s/he will need to vote. One of the ways to ensure this is not a problem is to observe the opening of the poll at your driver's polling station. Observe the opening procedures and using checklists supplied by the Commonwealth Secretariat, note down whether there are any problems.

□ **Your Approach as a Commonwealth Observer**

Commonwealth observers should always act in an impartial manner. Do not interfere in any of the electoral processes on election day. If voters approach you for assistance let them know that you will make a note of their complaint but that you are unable to rectify the problem.

□ **Use your Checklist**

The Commonwealth Secretariat will supply you with checklists for each stage of the electoral process. Please use these as they are an important guide for you through the different electoral procedures.

- ❑ **Close of the Poll**  
At the close of poll make sure you observe all the procedures and note down any problems.
- ❑ **The Count**  
Depending on specific legal requirements in the country, the count will either be held at the polling station or at a central counting centre. If the count is in the polling station make sure you observe this crucial process and note down any irregularities. If the count is held at a central counting area, try and ensure you follow the ballot boxes on the journey to the counting centre. Observe the count in the counting centre noting down any problems.
- ❑ **Transmission of Results**  
Try and get to the regional electoral centre or the national election commission to watch the results come in. This is a part of the process where fraud can take place and it is important that there is an observer presence to ensure correct procedures are followed. It may well be pertinent to return to the election commission the day after the election to monitor developments.

## **5.5. Writing the Report**

- ❑ **Post-Election Statement**  
Following the election, the Commonwealth Observer Group will release an interim statement. This gives a preliminary view of the organisation of the election. This statement is released soon after the election has ended and will probably be written while you are still in the field. You will be contacted by the Secretariat team about the statement. Make sure that you let the staff team know your views so that they can be included in the statement. Ask them to either fax the statement to you or read it out over the telephone. This is part of your Observer Group's response to the electoral process.
- ❑ **De-Briefing**  
On return to the capital, usually the day after the election, you will have a debriefing session. It is important in this meeting that you relay in a concise manner any problems you witnessed over the course of election day. These de-briefs will form an important element in the final report.
- ❑ **Drafting and Re-Drafting: It's Your Report**

The report that is written is an observer report. You write and re-write the report. There are two ways in which this can happen. First, Secretariat staff will draft the report based on your reports. You, as observers, will then redraft the report to a stage where you all agree with its contents. Second, as observers you will write different sections of the reports and then come together to undergo a drafting process. The report will be signed off by all of the observers before you all leave the country.

It is your report so make sure you are satisfied with the contents.

- **Making Recommendations**  
As part of the report, observers can make recommendations to the host government. This is very important in terms of your observation being part of a longer term development of democracy.
- **Report Publication and Distribution**  
An advance report is published within a week or two following the election. It is distributed around the Commonwealth. A later version containing photographs is released at a slightly later date.

#### **5.6. Departure Statement**

- **Why make a departure statement**  
The departure statement of the Commonwealth Observer Group is an important document especially if there have been problems between the end of election day and the date of departure. In this statement, the group makes its assessment of the overall process (up to the point of departure). Make sure you are satisfied with the content of the departure statement as it should reflect the views of the whole group.

#### **6. Follow-Up**

- **Feedback on Performance of the Mission**  
The Commonwealth Secretariat will ask you to complete a feedback form which will ask you to comment on your experience of the mission. Please take the time to fill in this form as it is only if you record your views that potential improvements can be made.
- **Implementation of Recommendations**  
As an observer you are entitled to enquire about any progress on the implementation of the recommendations that you, as an observer, suggested.