

**Arrival Statement by the Hon Paul Berenger,
Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group**

On behalf of the Commonwealth Observer Group, may I say how honoured and privileged we are to be present in your beautiful country. All of our members have now arrived and we have begun work.

The Commonwealth Secretary-General has constituted our Group at the invitation of the Government, and after a visit by a Commonwealth Secretariat Assessment Mission in July.

That Mission concluded that there is broad support from all stakeholders for the presence of Commonwealth Observers. It said that we would be able to observe all stages of the process.

Our Terms of Reference from the Commonwealth Secretary-General state that we are here to consider the various factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole, and to determine, in our own judgement, whether the conditions exist for a free expression of will by the electors, and if the results of the elections reflect the wishes of the people.

We will be neutral, impartial, objective and independent.

We cannot visit every polling station or be present everywhere. But we can and will attempt to take a representative sample of the process, so that we can arrive at a broad overview.

We will see the end of the immediate pre-election period – the final preparations for the election and the campaign. We will visit as many polling stations as we can. And we will see the results process through from the counts to the collation.

We will travel extensively, consult widely and take every opportunity to see the process for ourselves. We look forward to meeting as many people of this country as possible. We will co-operate closely with other international election observers and domestic monitors. We will, of course, abide by the laws of this country.

Each of us has been selected by the Commonwealth Secretary-General to participate in our individual capacities. We represent the whole Commonwealth. We are independent of our governments and any organisations to which we belong. Our concern is purely with the democratic arrangements and the credibility of the process.

One of our observers has been here since 1 September, observing the electoral environment. We have already received briefings from him, from the Electoral Commission and from Commonwealth High Commissioners. We will also be briefed by political parties, non-governmental organisations and international partners, media representatives and others. On Monday we will deploy around the country to observe the final stages of the campaign, the poll and the count.

After we have observed the results process we will return to Lusaka to consider our report. We will take into account our direct observations of the polling and results process. We will also consider the electoral environment as a whole – the legal framework, the voter registration process, civic and voter education, the media, the freedom of the parties to campaign, and the freedom of the voters to vote as they wish. We will write the report here and sign it before we depart on 5 October.

When we leave we will submit our report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General. He will in turn forward it to the Government, the Electoral Commission, the leadership of all the participating political parties, and then to all Commonwealth governments. The report will then be made publicly available, here and throughout the Commonwealth.

You may wish to know when you will hear from us again. I should tell you therefore that we will not be producing a running commentary on the election, day by day.

We may issue an interim statement after the polls close on 28 September. We may make further statements after that, on the results process – a part of the whole to which we attach particular importance. We are also likely to make a 'departure statement'. I am the Group's spokesman and will speak on behalf of the Group as a whole.

We wish the people of Zambia well as they approach the conclusion of this electoral process.

21 September 2006