

## **NEWS RELEASE**

### **ARRIVAL STATEMENT BY DR SALIM AHMED SALIM, CHAIRPERSON OF THE COMMONWEALTH OBSERVER GROUP**

The Chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of The Gambia invited the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, the Rt Hon Don McKinnon to send a group to observe the Presidential Election to be held in The Gambia on 22 September 2006.

After receiving the invitation, the Secretary-General sent an Assessment Mission from 17 to 24 August 2006. The Assessment Mission met with the IEC, representatives of the main political parties, non governmental-organisations and other interested parties. Their mandate was to establish whether there was broad support for the presence of Commonwealth Observers during the election period, and to obtain guarantees from the IEC that they would have freedom of movement and access to polling stations and counting centres. They were also to obtain confirmation that they were free to pursue their mandate.

The Mission concluded that there would be broad support for the presence of Commonwealth Observers.

Following the report of the Assessment Mission, the Secretary-General sent an advance group of observers which has just concluded an extensive tour of The Gambia. The advance group had the opportunity of meeting people throughout the country including representatives of the political parties, the police, and electoral officials.

All the members of the Observer Group have now assembled in The Gambia. I have the honour and privilege to chair this Group of eminent Commonwealth citizens which consists of:

**Hon Akua Dansua MP**

Member of Parliament  
Ghana

**Ms Daphne de Klerk**

Former Co-ordinator  
Non-Governmental Organisations  
Forum (NANGOF)  
Namibia

**Mrs Priscilla Kare**

Head  
YWCA  
Papua New Guinea

**Mr Jeremiah M. Matagaro**

Commissioner  
Electoral Commission of Kenya  
(ECK)  
Kenya

**Ms Hajra Mungula**

Steering Committee Member  
Tanzania Youth Coalition (TYC)  
Tanzania

**Hon Dr Eastlyn McKenzie MP**

Independent Senator  
Trinidad and Tobago

**Ms Marie Neilson**

Australian Electoral Officer &  
State Manager for Tasmania  
Australian Electoral Commission  
Australia

**Mr P.M. Siriwardhane**

Deputy Commissioner  
Department of Elections  
Sri Lanka

**Mr Eli Turk**

Chairman of the Board  
Human Rights Internet (HRI)  
Canada

The Observers have been invited in their individual capacities and the views they express regarding the elections will be their own and not those either of their respective governments or of the Commonwealth Secretariat. The Group will act in an impartial manner and will abide by the laws of The Gambia.

The group is assisted by a Commonwealth Support Team led by Professor Ade Adefuye, Head of the Africa Section, Political Affairs Division. The other members of the team are: Mr Linford Andrews, Mr Jarvis Matiya, Mr Julius Mucunguzi and Ms Saiqa Awan.

We are all pleased to be in The Gambia for the Presidential Election. The Commonwealth's engagement with The Gambia has been a long-standing one. A Commonwealth Observer Group was present for the last Presidential Election in October 2001. Since then, the Commonwealth has continuously engaged The Gambian stakeholders in the effort to promote and strengthen democracy.

We have been mandated to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the elections. We will consider all the factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole. Our two key tasks are to determine, in our judgment, 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 have met with the IEC to be briefed on the arrangements for the election. We have also met with a cross section of various NGOs and domestic observers. We will later today meet representatives of political parties, international observers and members of the diplomatic corps.

On Wednesday, we will deploy around the country. After we have witnessed the end of the campaign, the election day, the count and as much of the result process as we can see, we will re-assemble in Banjul to compile our report which we will complete and sign here, prior to our departure on 29 September 2006.

Our report will be submitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, who will in turn forward it to the Government of The Gambia, the IEC, the political parties participating in the election and then to all Commonwealth Governments. The Report will subsequently be made publicly available both here in The Gambia and throughout the Commonwealth, in printed form and on the website of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

The Kairaba Hotel  
Kololi  
18 September 2006