

7 April 2004

## **SRI LANKA GENERAL ELECTION 2004 COMMONWEALTH OBSERVER GROUP DEPARTURE STATEMENT**

We finish our work in Sri Lanka today after one of the best General Elections this country has had in recent years.

We observed that, except in the North and the East, the General Election took place in conditions of political freedom. The political parties were able to campaign and express their views. The voters were able to cast their ballots freely; we applaud them for the way in which they demonstrated their commitment to the democratic process, even in those areas where problems were apparent.

We conclude that except in the North, and to some extent in the East, the conditions existed for a free expression of will by the electors. The results reflected the wishes of the people of Sri Lanka.

The process was not credible in all respects. In particular, we remain deeply concerned about the impact of pre-election violence and intimidation and the role of the State media. Together, as our Chair said in the Interim Statement, these cast a shadow over the electoral process. We implore Sri Lanka's responsible political forces to ensure that all violence is removed from the campaign in future and that there is a level media playing field.

We recognise that this General Election represents a major breakthrough in the North and East, where for the first time since fighting began between the LTTE and Government security forces, there is now a possibility of normal democratic politics and credible elections.

However, this time only one party was able to campaign freely in the North and there were significant constraints on campaigning in the East. Before future elections all parties will need to agree that democracy can only proceed if all contestants have a fair chance and an equal freedom to campaign, and to act accordingly.

We have now completed our Report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, which he will in turn convey to the Head of Government, the Commissioner of Elections, the political parties and Commonwealth governments. It will then be made public. It contains our Conclusions and our Recommendations and a full account of our observation.

We leave Sri Lanka with respect and affection for its people, to whom we send our very best wishes, and thanks and appreciation for all the assistance extended to us during our stay here. The Commonwealth will follow events in Sri Lanka closely in the months and years to come, as will we as individuals. We wish you success in your work to build on this General Election and deepen democracy in Sri Lanka.

7 April 2004

### **Note to Editors**

This departure statement is available on the Commonwealth Secretariat website, [www.thecommonwealth.org](http://www.thecommonwealth.org). The Report of the Commonwealth Observer Group to the 2004 Sri Lanka General Election – which will be released in about a week – will also appear on the website.

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