

**COMMONWEALTH OBSERVER GROUP  
BOUGAINVILLE REFERENDUM  
PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

**Preliminary Statement by the Chair**

**HE Anote Tong, Former President of Kiribati**

**11 December 2019, Buka, Autonomous Region of Bougainville**

**Introduction**

This is a Preliminary Statement, and as such provides an initial assessment of the Bougainville Referendum process as we observed it. The Final Report, setting out our full findings on the entire process and our recommendations, will be submitted to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, and will be made public.

**Background**

The Commonwealth Observer Group, which I had the honour to lead, arrived in Bougainville on 22 November 2019, to observe the Referendum on the future political status of Bougainville, following an invitation to the Commonwealth Secretary-General from the Government of Papua New Guinea.

The Bougainville Referendum is a truly historic and watershed national moment. It was held in accordance with the Bougainville Peace Agreement of 2001.

In our Arrival Statement issued on 22 November 2019, we pledged to remain objective and impartial in our assessment of whether Bougainville's referendum process was in consonance with national referendum-related legislation and relevant regional, Commonwealth and other international commitments.

**Deployment**

Upon arrival in Papua New Guinea and Bougainville, we met the President and Vice President of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, the Speaker of the Bougainville House of Representatives, the Bougainville Referendum Commission, the Police, citizen and international observers, civil society groups, the media, Commonwealth High Commissioners and the United Nations officials.

On 22 November 2019 our teams were deployed to the three regions of Bougainville: Buka in the Northern Region, Arawa in the Central Region and Buin in Southern Region. I remained in Buka, and also undertook a brief visit to Arawa and the Panguna Mine area.

**Initial Observations**

Our assessment overall is that opening of the poll and voting were undertaken in a peaceful, joyous and orderly environment. The atmosphere at the polling booths and environs was characterised by a high degree of interest, festivity and anticipation. Our teams enjoyed unimpeded access and were warmly welcomed wherever we observed the referendum process.

On the whole, the opening, voting, closing, count and result announcement processes were undertaken in conformity with the prescribed procedures.

We noted that polling staff, scrutineers, observers and materials were present at the polling stations. The polling staff were generally knowledgeable and well prepared for the referendum. Overall, there were more male polling staff.

There was discreet and unarmed police presence at the polling stations we visited. We saw no evidence of undue influence of voters.

Voters with young children, pregnant women, the aged and persons with disabilities were given priority access to most polling stations.

The overwhelming majority of voters found their names on the Certified Voters List or were able to vote utilising the Provisional Voting system put in place.

We welcomed the continued use of gender tally sheets, both female and male.

The Bougainville Referendum Commission introduced several commendable innovations in the referendum process. Key innovations included the following:

- Introduction of postal voting.
- Introduction of provisional and declaration voting.
- Voting extended to Buka and Arawa Hospitals
- 29 remand (non-convicted) prisoners voted at Buka Police Station
- Upes (males in seclusion undergoing initiation rites) were facilitated to vote.
- Mixing of the ballot papers at the count to maintain the secrecy of the vote.

The Count was undertaken in a meticulous and transparent manner, in accordance with the prescribed procedure, in the presence of scrutineers, observers and the media.

As in any such exercise, there were challenges and some shortcomings which we observed. We were informed that perhaps the greatest challenge to these elections was the compressed timeframe for preparations. We believe that additional preparation time, and earlier release of required funding would have minimised further the shortcomings of this referendum.

In the first days of voting, we noted that the procedure for provisional voting was not consistently adhered to, and some voters were not facilitated to cast provisional votes. We were pleased to note that the Bougainville Referendum Commission responded positively to complaints, and sent clarification to Presiding Officers on the correct procedure to follow. We were pleased to note subsequent improvement in this context.

The layout of some polling stations and their placement of voting compartments had the potential of compromising the secrecy of the vote. We noted that some Presiding Officers made alterations to the layout in response to concerns in this regard.

Voting in Konnou was postponed by one day due to reports of security incidents. We were pleased to be informed that voting was able to proceed the following day.

## **Conclusions**

Our initial conclusions are as follows:

The Referendum held from 23 November to 7 December 2019 was credible, transparent and inclusive.

Bougainvilleans and residents qualified to vote who took part in the process had the opportunity to express their will and exercise their franchise. The Referendum outcome reflects the view of the majority who voted.

We commend the Bougainville Referendum Commission, polling and counting staff, the Bougainville Police Service and Bougainvilleans for successfully undertaking a complex administrative exercise in a challenging logistical environment. The polling and counting officers and staff displayed professionalism and resilience in discharging their duties.

We also wish to commend the scrutineers, observers, the media for their respective roles in ensuring the success of the referendum.

We also welcome advice from the Bougainville Women's Federation that there were no reports of polling related violence experienced by women.

We commend the people of Bougainville for the laudable 85 percent of registered voters who turned out for the referendum.

We express our appreciation to the UNOPS team that was deployed to support international observers. They offered practical assistance and advice that was invaluable to our mission.

We encourage Bougainvillean stakeholders to conduct a post-referendum review to further strengthen its electoral capacity and institutions. In this regard, some recommendations will be contained in our full Report.

**For more information, please contact Martin Kasirye**

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#### **Note to Editors**

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