

SADC Election Observer Mission Preliminary Statement

SADC Election Observer Mission Preliminary Statement By The Hon. Phumzile Mlambo Ngcuka

On The Zimbabwe Parliamentary Elections Held On 31 March 2005

At the invitation of the government of the Republic of Zimbabwe, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Elections Observers Mission (SOEM), observed the 6th Parliamentary Elections of the Republic of Zimbabwe from 15th March to 2nd April 2005. As provided for in the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, it is my singular honor and privilege to seize this opportunity to announce to this august gathering the SADC's preliminary views on the outcome of its observation mission. A detailed report addressing specific items of the Terms of Reference (TORs) for the Mission shall be released within the next 30 (thirty) days.

Let me at the outset begin by extending on behalf of SADC and, indeed on my own behalf, congratulations to the people of Zimbabwe following the holding of a peaceful, credible, well managed and transparent elections. The people of the Zimbabwe have expressed their will in an impressively instructive manner that will go a long way in contributing to the consolidation of democracy and political stability not only in Zimbabwe but also in the region as whole. SADC wishes therefore, to commend the people of Zimbabwe for high levels of political tolerance and maturity displayed. This, in SADC's view, bodes well for nurturing a culture that tolerates multipartyism, as an essential building block for democracy.

The Mission was officially launched on 15 of March 2005 on the arrival of the leader of the Mission and the Executive Secretary of SADC. However, SADC had pre-election observers constituted by the Diplomatic Missions accredited to Zimbabwe. The following Member States were represented in the Mission: Angola, Botswana, DRC, Lesotho, Namibia, Malawi, Mozambique, United Republic of Tanzania, South Africa and Zambia.

The Mission set up an Operations Room staffed by professionals from the Office of the Chairperson of the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation and the SADC Secretariat to coordinate the activities of the members deployed across the country.

Guided by the SADC Principles and Guidelines as its terms of reference, fifty-five observers were deployed throughout the length and breadth of Zimbabwe in both rural and urban areas to observe the elections. Field teams supported by a fleet of 16 all terrain vehicles, were deployed to Mashonaland West, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland Central, Bulawayo, Midlands, Matebeleland North, Matebeleland South, Masvingo, Manicaland and Harare from the 23rd March to 1st April 2005. The ongoing work of the SADC Ambassadors accredited in Harare laid the foundation for the election observer mission.

The Mission traveled extensively in the rural areas covering 95 percent of the total national constituencies and attended over 2000 meetings and political rallies organized by political parties and independent candidates. The leader of the Mission traveled to all corners of the country by road and by air visiting rural areas such as Mutoko in Mashonaland East, Shamva in Mashonaland Central, Odzi in Manicaland,, Grate Zimbabwe in Masvingo and Gwanda in Matebeleland South. In general the pre-election phase was characterized by peace, tolerance and political vigor of the party leaders and candidates.

No violence was observed countrywide except for few incidences, which were followed up and reported to police.

With regard to the polling process, it is SADC's overall view that the elections were conducted in an open, transparent and professional manner. The polling stations opened and closed at the appointed times and SADC was impressed by the orderliness and patience of voters, who we believe, were able to express their franchise peacefully, freely and unhindered. The picture that emerged at the close of poll was an election day, which was peaceful. This confirmed the determination of the people of Zimbabwe to do their best to implement the SADC Principle and Guidelines Governing democratic elections in the region.

The vote counting process was conducted meticulously and lawfully. It is worth noting that all stakeholders from party agents, monitors, presiding officers and local observers performed their duty as expected and no one could leave the room before the counting was finalized.

In the discharge of its duties the SADC Mission interacted with political parties and independent candidates. It also met with the African Union, the Election Commissions Forum of SADC Member States, national delegations, Civil Society organizations and opinion-makers, members of the media from within and beyond the region. These interactions served to gain an insight of the political environment and to compare notes on various aspects of the election process. SADC was humbled by compliments extended by the people of Zimbabwe wherever its members were present. SADC would like to thank all those who, in one way have been of assistance to the members of the Mission.

During the deployment, SADC Mission observed:

- High level of political maturity;
- Peaceful atmosphere in which supporters of different parties were sharing transport, interacted and joked at each other;
- Most members of the police were helpful;
- The use of Shona, Ndebele and English languages in the instructions for voting posted inside the voting booth ensured an informed decision;
- The use of translucent ballot boxes was a step forward in ensuring transparent voting process;
- SADC presence inspired confidence in the voters'
- Cooperation of election authorities and other institutions in providing clarifications for complaints;
- Learning and familiarization with the spirit and the letter of the SADC Principles and Guidelines;
- The police apprehended unlawful members of all political parties;

It is SADC's greatest hope that the spirit of co-operation and political tolerance and responsible role of political parties, which prevailed thus far will continue to thrive amongst all parties and role players in the post election phase as part of reenergizing the momentum for nation building and reconciliation.

However, SADC Mission noted issues and areas that will require recasting and or improvement.

These include:

- Improvement of equitable access to the state media by all political parties;

The need to simplify the procedure and to ensure that authorizations for voters education are provided easily and timeously by the relevant institutions;
The need for wide publication of updating and verification of voter's roll;
Need to ensure that all police and presiding officers are informed of the role and rights of observers; and
Ensure that complaints are backed by sound and verifiable facts to facilitate follow up and fast decision-making;

SADC Mission was concerned with about the number of people who were turned away from polling stations. After consultations with ZEC and Registrar of Voters, the Mission was informed that most of them turned away because they did not have valid IDs, they did not check the voters roll within the stipulated period, did not register, or had gone to wrong constituencies. Notwithstanding these reasons it is the Mission's view that the voters' registration process requires improvement.

The Mission received 10 complaints from the opposition party alleging covert intimidations, use of food as political tool, delays in authorizing rallies, access to state media, lack of compliance with the SADC Guidelines, inflation voters roll and unlawful arrests. The mission followed up all the allegations with the relevant institutions and feedback was given to the complainant. It is a strongly recommended that, once all the facts have been gathered, they should be presented to the Electoral Court for determination. However, these complaints and allegations do not compromise the will of the people of Zimbabwe.

It is also the Mission's view that, although there were efforts to ensure equitable access to the public media, there is still much to be done in this area to improve the access to the state media by the opposition. There were also concerns expressed by the opposition regarding the indelible ink and it is right that these should be examined by the relevant electoral authorities. An allegation of particular concern to the Mission was the reference to the use of food as an electoral tool, which the Mission was not in the position to confirm. This should be investigated further by the relevant authorities.

The Electoral Authorities of Zimbabwe displayed not only a professional discharge of duty but also a high sense of gender equity and youth representation in the election process. This effort deserves commendation and Zimbabwe should be encouraged to stay steadfast in this path.

Once again, SADC Mission congratulates the people of Zimbabwe for peaceful, transparent, credible, well-mannered elections, which reflects the will of the people. In line with the SADC Principles and Guidelines, Mission would like to urge all political parties and candidates to respect the will of the people and, any complaint should be pursued with the Electoral Court.

We would like to reiterate SADC's commitment to continue supporting the people of Zimbabwe in National reconstruction and development efforts.

2nd April 2005

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