

## **Guyana – 1992 – Presidential Election**

Hello, my name is Jeff Fischer. I'm going to be speaking today about my experiences in Guyana in 1992. On October the 5th Election Day, the first rock crashed through a third floor window of the Guyana Elections Commission, taking out most of a window pane and spinning across the floor in front of me. I feared that my work over the last 18 months in assisting the Elections Commission to conduct this election might also have been shattered.

I have been consulting with the Guyana Elections Commission since April of 1991 for the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. I was working with the Elections Commission to organize free and fair elections, the first since the 1960s. The October 5th election date finally arrived, surviving postponements and subversions, but the rock-throwing mob, which had massed in front of our office, posed an entirely new kind of threat. A violent assault to close down the election.

Election Day began smoothly at 6:00 AM. Long lines at polls and a few administrative glitches were the worst problems reported by international observers from The Carter Center and Commonwealth teams. However, at mid-morning, a busload of people was unloaded in front of the Election Commission's offices, quickly followed by a government television station truck. The people staged a vocal protest about alleged instances of disenfranchisement at the polls. After about 45 minutes, the camera crew left and so did most of the protesters, with a few particularly vocal ones now left behind to continue. By noon, the crowd had grown again, chanting anti-Elections Commission slogans, shaking fists at the building and pummeling the Commission headquarters with bricks and stones. By half past the hour, local staff and consultants will move from the first floor to the third floor. The mob shook the cast iron gates in front of the Commission, held back by only a handful of unarmed constables.

Until today, there had been sufficient protection. As the situation deteriorated, Elections Commission Chairman Rudy Collins decided just after 1:00 PM to evacuate non-essential local staff, United Nations computer operators and US consultants. As this group left the building by two different exits, the mob spotted us and started to chase a few young clerical workers who were broken into a run. While running provoked more of the mob to chase them up the street, the election workers were heading toward the nearby Brickdam police station. Others of us walked up the block and turned the opposite direction from the police station. We attempted to stand inconspicuously on the street. The mob collected itself with a greater ferocity in front of the building. Our evicted group waited on the street to hail a taxi or other friendly vehicle.

An Elections Commission car picked us up and took us to the United Nations compound in the Brickdam neighborhood. He referred to the rescue effort as a US trailblazer; (it

had picked up those Americans who had gone to the police station. Now it had arrived at the UN office to get us, but after getting into the vehicle, we were told by the Embassy representative that it would be necessary to return to the Elections Commission building and Media Center, located across the street from the Commission. He explained that there was a report of a US journalist who needed to be picked up at the Media Center and the safety of U.S. ambassador George Jones, who had gone to the Commission, was in question. The Ambassador had been slightly cut on the hand by flying glass from a broken car window.

A vehicle returned to the Elections Commission approaching the mob from its rear, remaining across the street from the building. The Commission building looked as though it had been hit by mortar fire. Every window had been broken. And the facade was pockmarked from the bricks and stones. I jumped out of the Trailblazer and went to the Media Center to find the journalist. He was not there. Then the embassy representative and I walked to check on the whereabouts of the Ambassador. After we got up to the entrance, we could see him standing at the same intersection. I had just escaped from 30 minutes ago. A group of journalists, observers and Guyanese were being escorted from the Elections Commission building.

Election Chairman Rudy Collins and key staff continue to occupy the building. This was an act of personal courage and an affirmation that the election process would continue. I got into a second Embassy car, but with two opposition party members of the Elections Commission. "The Dame saved us," said Ralph Kincarn, a member of the Commission. I did not know what he was talking about. Was this a prayer that saved us? "She said again, she demanded police protection and she saved us." Now I knew what he meant. Dame Anne Herkas of New Zealand was a member of the Commonwealth Observer team and was the one who interceded with the Georgetown Police Commissioner to deploy adequate protection at the building.

The opposition commissioners wanted to be taken to the neighborhood around Freedom House, the political headquarters on Robb Street. of the People's Progressive Party-Civic, the opposition party. This party would win the Presidency from the ruling People's National Congress in this election. It was reported that Freedom House was being attacked and they wanted to be there. The Commissioners were dropped off on Broad Street and five US consultants were taken to the US Embassy.

Although there were reports of sporadic violence in other locations, it appeared that the Commission headquarters was the focus of the disturbances. The balloting was continuing in a routine fashion. By the time we returned to the Commission offices at around 3:30 PM, the mob had gone through another permutation and turned to looting in downtown Georgetown. Why had police surrounded the building for a brief afternoon appearance? However, soon they were gone and we were back to a handful of police.

As it began to get dark, an army helicopter hovered over the crowd in a vain effort to disperse it. Demands for more police protection were made by Chairman Collins. However, despite assurances by Police Commissioner Lewis and President Desmond Hoyt, no help materialized.

During my absence, Chairman Collins had broadcast a message that those who claimed that they were disenfranchised at the polls would be allowed to vote at the Commission building. Their names would be checked with the master voters list. Voters lined up to end their disenfranchisement. People were continuing to vote on the 1st floor of the building at 6:00 PM. Polls were to have been closed at six, but the chairman extended the closing until seven for every poll to assure that all those who wanted to vote would be given the opportunity. However, outside the building, the situation was simply not under control. Shots were continuing to be heard in the neighborhood and there was no significant police presence. Without police protection, the Elections Commission was vulnerable to attack and vandalism, which could have shut down operations. A second organized evacuation was undertaken. At this time, it was to move communications and computer gear to a backup command post at a hotel to monitor and log unofficial election results.

Chairman Collins was despairing and frustrated about the lack of police protection and the apparent duplicity between public reports and the facts at the Commission. "Get Jimmy Carter here and you will have protection," US consultant Hank Valentino advised the Chairman. But the Chairman said he could not request that a former President of the United States come into a situation like this one. Mr. Valentino said he understood. But if the Chairman could not make the request, a US consultant could. And he did.

At about 8:00 PM, the call came to the hotel to return to the Elections Commission. Jimmy Carter had gone to the Elections Commission and was talking with the Police Commissioner and President Desmond Hoyt about the lack of protection. As we arrived back at the building again, riot police were taking up their posts. We re-established ourselves at the Commission for a final time. A sense of recapture had been achieved. Phalanxes of troopers in riot gear cleared the mob back from the building in a matter of minutes. The mob was scattered with the volleys of warning shots and no mob reappeared at the building again. Just after 9:00 PM, election results began to be radioed in. The process was back on track and would continue to be a free and fair conclusion. It was speculated that the ruling party was behind the initial protest believing that it was going to lose and failing to have a significant administrative failure which would postpone the process indefinitely, it sought either a grand diversion for other manipulation to occur or to push the election system into collapse.

After a point, a criminal element took over and the looting, violence, and vandalism which occurred for the next two days had nothing to do with the disenfranchisement.

The Guyana election process had been subject to scrutiny, support ,and reform for the previous two years. The election laws had been rewritten to make the process more equitable. The international community had provided supplies and technical assistance to assist in administering the process. Ongoing observation teams maintained a daily check on the progress of the reform. Despite these contributions, in the final analysis, the success of the election hinges upon a test of wills between a mob which sought to use violence to thwart it, and Elections Commission staff who were determined to see the election process successfully completed.