

PRESS RELEASE

31/10/13

FOR IMMEDIATE USE

International observers to Abyei Area Community Referendum release preliminary findings

The declaration made by the Ngok Dinka general conference which established the Abyei Area Community Referendum Commission invited international observers to witness the referendum. Although foreign journalists also enjoyed a high level of access and civil society organisations and opposition political parties in South Sudan acted as external observers, we were the only international observers who responded to the invitation.

Our observation mission began on the 21st November, the second day of registration. We enjoyed access to all referendum centres during registration, polling and counting procedures, and walk-in access to the referendum commission's data centre at all times. We visited 11 centres: 8 during registration and 8 during polling, and observed 2 counts from start to finish. The referendum commission and staff at referendum centres were extremely co-operative and helpful. They facilitated our transport to rural centres and changed plans so we could visit centres of our choice rather than the centres they wanted us to visit.

A full report will be published in due course. However, we have been sufficiently satisfied with the high standards exhibited by the process to declare the following:

There was a high level of transparency in the Abyei Area Community Referendum. The referendum was peaceful and credible. We would like to commend the Abyei Area Community Referendum Commission for a comprehensive and thorough process well-executed. We are satisfied that the results of the Abyei Area Community Referendum accurately represent the genuine expression of the will of the electorate.

While there were minor irregularities deriving from the short timetable and lack of time available for voter education and staff training, the integrity and credibility of the process was not compromised. This was an extraordinary achievement given the logistical challenges the Commission faced. We had some concerns about assisted voting and lack of attention to secrecy by both voters and staff in a small number of centres, but this was the exception and not the norm. Where it did take place, we are satisfied voters were given a genuine choice and manipulation was not the intent. Assistance was generally given in response to requests by voters and attempting to mitigate the problems faced by illiterate and disabled voters.

In many respects the Abyei referendum exceeded the standards met by the South Sudanese referendum held in January 2011. For example, rules and regulations were published in advance of the start of the process. Centres were well-situated in areas where local populations were concentrated and local referendum committees had the flexibility to set up sub-centres, resulting in excellent access. Unlike the South Sudanese referendum, in no referendum centre did ballots cast exceed the number of registered voters. There was no shortage of registration materials and procedures for packing and distributing sensitive materials were consistently adhered to. There was no confusion over voter eligibility and no-one who was eligible to vote was prevented from registering. There is no compelling evidence for incidences of under-age registration. There was no armed security presence inside any referendum centre. There were no reports of direct intimidation. Difficulties with the compilation of voter lists did not result in any voter being turned away. Observers were not obstructed from accessing the data centre at any time.

We find that there are no good technical reasons to fail to recognise the Abyei referendum. Countries and institutions who recognised the results of the South Sudanese referendum of 2011 as

a genuine expression of the will of the electorate, but who fail to do so in this case, will do so for political rather than technical reasons.

ENDS

Notes:

1. The international observers are Tim Flatman, a regular visitor to Abyei working voluntarily and directly with local churches to support the displaced Ngok Dinka and returnees north of the river Kiiir, and Hannah Cross, his fiance, who is visiting Abyei for the first time. Tim has been an election agent on numerous occasions in the UK and is familiar with all aspects of electoral procedures. They can be contacted at tflatman@gmail.com or on +249 (0) 901703063