



NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SECOND NDI PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

June 1996 Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) has continued its observation of the June 1996 parliamentary election process in Bangladesh by observing the June 19 re-polling around the country. Former U.S. Congressman Stephen Solarz and former Australian Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock have led a nine-member multinational observer team.

This statement augments the preliminary statement issued on June 14 of a 30-person NDI observer delegation, with members from 16 countries, also led by Mr. Solarz and Mr. Peacock. NDI will prepare a comprehensive, final report at a later date. In the month before the elections, NDI organized two pre-election missions to Bangladesh, led respectively by Congressman Solarz and U.S. Congressman Bill Richardson. NDI representatives have been present in Bangladesh throughout most of the past 18 months, and the Institute has maintained an election observing presence in the country continuously since May 6. NDI staff members will remain in Bangladesh for a period of time to observe post-election developments, including the re-polling in one polling station in Comilla 3 constituency and the filing of election petitions.

NDI organized this election observation program to demonstrate the interest and support of the international community for the continued development of democracy in Bangladesh and to promote confidence in the election process. NDI was welcomed to observe these elections by the President, the Caretaker Government, the Election Commission and leaders of all major parties. Following international norms for election observing, NDI has been strictly neutral and has not supported any party or candidate. We accepted and have followed the terms established by the Election Commission for international observation of these elections. We did not come to supervise the elections but rather to observe and report publicly on our findings. The electoral authorities and the people of Bangladesh will make their own judgments about the quality and character of these elections.



conducting nonpartisan international programs to help maintain and strengthen democratic institutions

On June 12 authorities suspended polling at 167 stations around the country. Re-polling was conducted on June 19 in the 122 of those polling stations where the number of voters exceeded the margin between the first and second place candidates.

The NDI team for the re-polling met in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country with the President, the Chief Advisor, the Chief Election Commissioner, leaders of the political parties and candidates, returning officers and other electoral officials, domestic election observers, members of other international observer groups, and others involved in the electoral process. The delegation divided into five teams that observed the balloting and counting processes in Chittagong, Comilla, Faridpur and Narayanganj. On June 19, we visited polling stations in seven constituencies. We also consulted with representatives of the SAARC, Commonwealth and European Union observers who visited a number of other constituencies where re-polling was taking place.

The high turnout and enthusiasm of the voters have once again greatly impressed us. The administration of the re-polling was excellent. With one notable exception, the re-polling that we observed was peaceful and open, and the enhanced security effectively prevented additional problems.

We did observe problems in one location in Comilla district. At Brahmanchaitola in Comilla 3 constituency our team arrived at the polling station shortly after a group stormed the polling station and threw two ballot boxes into the water and ripped up the ballots in a third. The seemingly ample security forces on site apparently did nothing to prevent the unfortunate incident.

It is outrageous that someone would interfere with the integrity of the balloting and the sanctity of the polling place on election day. We urge the competent authorities to initiate a thorough investigation and to hold those involved responsible. For the second ordered re-polling of this station, we trust that security will be more than adequate to give confidence to the voters and to prevent a repeat of such a disruption. We do note, however, that once again less than one percent of the polling stations suffered such serious disturbances as to require re-polling.

Majority and minority communities in Bangladesh generally live together peacefully. Near the Karnaphuli River in Chittagong 6 constituency, however, there was substantial evidence that many people, especially but not only members of minorities, were deeply afraid to vote. This was reflected by a low turnout at the two polling stations being re-pollled in this area, especially of the minority community among whom the turnout was not more than 15 percent as compared with an average of 60 percent in the other parts of the same constituency.

We urge all parties and candidates with election-related complaints to make their charges with specificity and to file them, along with supporting documentation, with the election tribunals. We understand that the Election Commission has established election tribunals in virtually all districts, and we applaud its efforts to ensure that the tribunals will hear and act upon such complaints promptly.

We continued to hear complaints about illegal expenditures by candidates, and we urge appropriate enforcement of legal requirements for candidates to file financial reports.

The fact that there were some irregularities and problems during the election process, however deplorable they were, does not mean in and of itself that the elections were unfair or otherwise lack legitimacy. There have been few elections anywhere in the world without some unfortunate incidents or improprieties. Rather the question is whether the irregularities in the election process were of such a magnitude as to plausibly call into question the reported outcome. We believe that the irregularities and problems that there were, although real and serious, were not of such a nature and scale as to suggest that the result, taken as a whole across Bangladesh, fails to reflect the will of the Bangladeshi people. Once again, we found the electoral process on June 19, like the one we observed on June 12, to be fundamentally transparent and honest.

We pay tribute once more to the people of Bangladesh for their evident commitment to democracy. We commend the Caretaker Government and Election Commission for effectively organizing these elections and for creating an environment in which meaningful elections could take place. We congratulate all the parties and candidates, whether they won or lost, who competed fairly in these elections.

We urge again the party or parties that form the next government to reach out to their rivals in a spirit of reconciliation and cooperation. We appeal to those parties that do not participate in the next government to accept their defeat graciously and with dignity and to take up their vital role as a responsible and loyal, democratic opposition. If they do so, these elections will allow Bangladesh to face its future with optimism and confidence.