



FOR INFORMATION CONTACT:

In Abuja: Wayne Propst: 0803-315 4282

NDI Abuja office: 523-3341

In Washington DC: Jean Freedberg 202-728-5528

e-mail: ndi jean@aol.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

EXTRAORDINARY STEPS NEEDED TO BUILD PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN NIGERIA'S POLITICAL PROCESS, SAYS NDI

"The challenge for Nigeria's leaders from across the political spectrum is to rise to the level of the people's aspirations."

Abuja, Nigeria, April 21, 2003: An international delegation organized by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to Nigeria's 2003 elections today issued a statement on the April 19 Presidential and Gubernatorial polls. The delegation, which has been conducted in two phases over the period of the National Assembly and Presidential elections, includes 50 observers from 12 nations in Africa, Europe, North America and Asia. The leaders of this phase of the delegation are the Honorable Joseph Warioba, former Prime Minister of Tanzania; Kenneth Wollack, NDI President, Honorable Nora Schimming-Chase, Member of Parliament from Namibia, Honorable Carole Hillard, former Lt. Governor, South Dakota, and Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh, NDI Senior Associate for Africa.

The delegation emphasized that this statement was not a conclusive assessment of the process, since the tabulation of results for neither the National Assembly, Presidential nor the gubernatorial elections has been completed.

The delegation said: "Elections in any country bring to light the strengths and weaknesses of political institutions as a whole. This is true in Nigeria. It is the hope of this delegation that these elections will provide a structural framework upon which to replicate and expand the positive practices that did occur, and to correct flaws in Nigeria's evolving democratic dispensation."

Delegation teams were deployed in Abia, Anambra, Delta, Edo, Enugu, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kogi, Lagos, Niger, Oyo, Plateau, Rivers and Sokoto and Federal Capital Territory (FCT). The delegation recognized the vast majority of Nigerians who expressed their right to choose the candidates and parties of their choice with determination and patience, and in a peaceful manner. In the week between the April 12 and April 19 polls, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) rectified many of the logistical problems that marred the conduct of the National Assembly elections, which enabled the majority of polling stations to open on time. Provisions were made in many places to allow voters to mark their ballots in secret, and efforts were also made to improve the logistical conditions for the counting and tabulation of results.

However, the delegation noted a range of widely varying electoral practices across the country –in some areas problems occurred but were localized and not likely to have a measurable impact on the outcome, and those where blatant malpractices clearly distorted the poll results in areas where they occurred.

In addition to noting problems with the electoral framework, the high incidence of violence in the pre-election period and the shortcomings of the voter registration process, the delegation listed serious concerns about the conduct of the elections. These included, in a number of areas around the country: fraudulent use of the ballot box, disenfranchisement of voters, altered results, election violence and lack of ballot secrecy. These problems have substantially compromised the integrity of the electoral process, particularly in the areas where they occurred, and if not rectified, will erode public confidence in the country's overall political process. In the immediate post-election period, corrective action should be taken through the court system and followed by a national dialogue on genuine election reform between government, political parties and civil society.

NDI offered a number of recommendations:

- The Nigerian government should convene a comprehensive, inclusive and nationwide review of the entire electoral framework that will lead to fundamental reforms. These reforms should include, among others, the proper implementation of a continuous system of voter registration, the streamlining of the multi-tiered tabulation process and the nationwide publication and posting of results from individual polling sites. Provision should also be made to allow for poll workers and on-duty security personnel to vote.
- The Nigerian government should provide INEC with adequate funds in a timely manner so that it can carry out its responsibilities, and should grant it greater autonomy and independence.
- A more autonomous and accountable INEC must resolve problems in the election process, implement internal reforms to improve its technical capacity, strengthen internal controls to protect the sanctity of the voting process and immediately make public the voter registry.
- The Nigerian government, INEC and political parties should share responsibility and give priority to conducting voter and civic education.
- Nigerian electoral tribunals should move expeditiously and fairly in assuming responsibility to adjudicate election disputes.
- Political parties should adhere to conduct that rejects violence as an instrument of political participation. Political leaders should assume responsibility for reining in those within their party ranks who are committing violent acts. Perpetrators of political violence should be prosecuted.
- Nigerian civil society groups and individual citizens should continue and expand their efforts to promote and protect a democratic election process.
- At all levels of Nigerian society, extraordinary efforts must be made to reduce opportunities for the corruption that has too often undermined the conduct of elections and the country's nascent democratic institutions.

The full text of the delegation's statement can be found on the NDI website at www.ndi.org.

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