

15.02.2006

GECOM MEDIA STATEMENT

This Media Statement represents a Report to the nation on the current state of affairs as it relates to the readiness of the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) to hold elections before the constitutionally mandated date. We believe that the information that follows hereafter, which pertains to some of the main activities/achievements, will indicate that the Commission has consistently and conscientiously been working towards the achievement of this objective.

Elections Project Plan in Microsoft Project Format

GECOM's Secretariat staff has developed a comprehensive Elections Project Plan as a management tool for the preparations for and administration of General and Regional Elections in 2006. This Plan has been put in Microsoft Project format, with assistance from an overseas based IBM Consultant, with a view to establishing clear guidance in terms of critical tasks, timelines and resource (human/material/financial) requirements. While the Commission is being guided by this Plan in the preparations for and administration of the upcoming elections, there might arise the need, as with any plan, to review and revise its content.

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)

GECOM, the Government of Guyana and the Donor Community signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) concretizing their collective support to the democratic process in Guyana through a variety of separate instruments. It is expected that all signatories will commit to the holding of free and fair elections that are in accordance with the Constitution and other relevant laws of Guyana which embrace the international standards, as articulated by various UN Declarations, Covenants, Conventions, Resolutions and Reports, and that will be continually assessed for compliance with international standards by the Joint International Technical Assessors (JITAs), and that are open to international and domestic observation throughout the electoral process with the view to fostering of broad public confidence in the electoral process.

Joint International Technical Assessors (JITAs)

Two Joint International Technical Assessors (JITAs) are currently attached to GECOM to observe all aspects of the elections process and to ensure that they meet international standards. They are Dr Kwadwo Afari-Gyan, Chairman of the Electoral Commission of Ghana whose expertise had been made possible to GECOM under the auspices of the Commonwealth Secretariat and Mr. Stephen Beale, whose expertise had been made possible under the auspices of the Donor Community.

The main responsibilities of the JITAs are:-

1. to advise GECOM on the management of international standards for elections, and assist the Commission and its Secretariat in the adoption of good practice during preparations for and conduct of the upcoming elections;
2. to monitor the technical conduct of election preparations at all levels throughout the election process; and
3. to produce technical quality assessment reports in the form of periodic written assessments, to be presented to GECOM, the Donor Agencies which have subscribed to the Memorandum of Understanding, the Government of Guyana, and to the National Assembly.

The JITAs submit regular reports to the Commission and the Donor Community. Their appointments are intended to ensure transparency and confidence in the Commission's arrangements and above all efficient and professional planning for and delivery of the Elections.

Meetings with the Donor Agencies/Political Parties/Potential Local Observers

GECOM continues to meet with the Donor Agencies, Political Parties and potential Local Observers on a regular basis on several matters pertaining to the upcoming elections. This was done as recently as Friday, February 10, 2006 when a meeting was held with Senior Representatives of the Donor Community to discuss a very specific recommendation contained in the Memorandum of Understanding for the 2006 elections i.e. GECOM "should seek to hold regular meetings to discuss operation arrangements with the political parties".

CONTINUOUS REGISTRATION

Since the Commission had set as a main focus the establishment of a system of Continuous Registration an immense effort had to be made to bring us to the point that we are now. Continuous Registration Manuals had to be prepared, discussed, reworked and further developed. New forms, new laws, new strategies for registration had to be developed to the satisfaction of all – Commission, Secretariat and Stakeholders. Attention had to be paid specifically to the following matters:-

Concept Paper for Continuous Registration/ Operations Manual for Continuous Registration in Guyana

A Concept Paper on Continuous Registration which was developed by GECOM's Secretariat has evolved into the Operations Manual for the Implementation of Continuous Registration (OMICR). This OMICR document is being used as the official guide for the Continuous Registration process.

Implementation of Continuous Registration

With regards to the implementation of Continuous Registration the following had to be completed:-

1. National Registration (Amendment) Bill 2005
2. Regulations Associated with the National Registration (Amendment) Act 2005

3. Procedural Manual For The Implementation Of Continuous Registration
4. Recruitment and Training of Registration Staff
5. Documenting the “Role of Scrutineers”, and Training Scrutineers
6. Printing of Registration Forms
7. Establishing Registration Offices
8. District Registration Offices

Twenty Three Registration Offices were initially established in all ten of Guyana’s Registration Districts for the commencement of the Continuous Registration exercise. Their establishment and respective locations were gazetted and publicized in the three major local newspapers.

9. Additional (Sub) Offices

GECOM recently established four additional Registration Offices in Registration Districts 1, and 4 with the aim of ensuring that eligible persons living in the target areas could present themselves to become registered with more ease. Another Registration Sub-Office will soon be opened at Mahaica, East Coast Demerara, bringing the total to 28 Offices accessible to persons eligible for registration.

10. Procurement of electoral materials and equipment, Forms, stationary, furniture, computers and accessories, photocopiers and generators.
11. Procurement of vehicles
12. Resolving matters pertinent to the permanence and payment of Scrutineers

Civic/Voter Education Activities

From the commencement of the Continuous Registration exercise we established hotlines (the numbers of which are published in the local newspapers including the Kaieteur News on a daily basis) to provide information about the registration process. In addition to our published advertisements, we having been promoting the exercise by (i) installing banners/posters at strategic locations; (ii) distributing appropriate flyers; (iii) blaring relevant messages in various communities with mobile public address systems; (iv) making announcements at schools with the approval of the Ministry of Education; (v) advertising the launching Mobile Registration Units to facilitate the registration of eligible persons living in far-flung riverain and hinterland communities. Last but not least, the production of advertisements that are being broadcast by the electronic media on a daily basis to bolster GECOM’s public awareness campaign about the Continuous Registration exercise. We are satisfied that our Public Awareness Campaign has been delivering the desired results.

Mobile Units

GECOM has been dispatching Mobile Registration Units to far flung riverain and hinterland communities to provide easier access for eligible persons to become registered.

Website

The website of the Guyana Elections Commission was launched in December 2005 as a means of making relevant information available to Stakeholders on a permanent basis. The website consists of two main components. One part covers basic information about Guyana, the Guyana Elections Commission, Guyana Elections and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). The other part covers Media Centre, Handbooks, Past Elections Results and Feedback. The material content is based mainly on statutory provisions and information extracted from printed materials, which include almost all of the publications of GECOM and such other textual materials relevant to the operations of the Commission.

The complete design of the website was done internally at GECOM with emphasis being placed on its being user friendly. A standard method of interfacing from summary topics to different levels of details is adopted. Horizontal and vertical navigation at various levels are provided for instantaneous movement amongst the variety of data views available on this website. Additionally, one could return to the home page by simply clicking on the HOME icon provided on every page of the site. Our website's address is www.gecom.org.gy

Media Monitoring Unit (MMU)

GECOM, with financial and Technical Support will soon benefit from the work of its own Media Monitoring Unit which is being created to provide feedback on the publication of all information which could cause GECOM and its stakeholders to affect and/or be affected by each other.

The MMU will be Responsible for:-

- Using the Media Code of Conduct as a guide to monitor and analyse the publication of information on election related matters by the print and electronic media.
- Report all incidents of publication of information which has the potential of being detrimental to GECOM's work in an accurate and timely manner.
- Make recommendations to the Commission on the need for or against response to published information that is deemed to worthy of such action.

The MMU, for which adequate staff have already been hired and are in the process of being trained by Commonwealth Consultant, Mr. Tim Neale, is in its final stages of readiness and will commence operations very shortly.

Accessing the 2001 OLE database

The IT Division recently opened the 2001 OLE database to facilitate the processing of applications for transfers and corrections to registrants' personal information as part of the ongoing Continuation Process.

Replacement of the MIDI System

GECOM has contracted De La Rue to replace the existing MIDI System which was found to be defective when an effort was made to produce replacement ID cards for persons who got their's lost or damaged. The replacement will be effected very soon, thereby clearing the way for the commencement of production of ID cards.

Retooling/Reorganizing of the IT division

In preparation for the commencement of Continuous Registration and preparations for the upcoming elections, the IT Division has been retooled and reorganized to allow for efficient inputting of registration data in the compilation of the National Register of Registrants and the generation of the voters list for the 2006 elections. This involved renovation to the IT area, purchase of new computers and other relevant IT equipment and accessories, transfer of the responsibility for inputting registrants' data from the IT Division to the Registration Division, and the implementation of a regime of measures relevant to the security of the IT Division.

Accreditation of International Observers

GECOM, as a signatory to the Memorandum of Understanding has committed itself to the presence of International Observers to monitor the electoral process in Guyana. International Observers, which can only be invited by the Government of Guyana to monitor the elections, will be given accreditation as set out in the Laws of Guyana. A Terms of Reference associated with the work of International Observers is enshrined in the MoU.

Domestic Election Observers/Accreditation of Local Observer Groups (Umbrella Body)

In addition to the accreditation of International Observers, GECOM has agreed to accredit non-governmental organisations, service organisations and any body of civic-minded citizens operating in Guyana, and their members, as individual domestic observer groups, subject to them indicating the desire to so be, and to abide by the protocols developed by GECOM for their operations. In this regard, GECOM is advocating the appointment of an "umbrella body" comprising representatives from the accredited domestic observer groups to relate with the Commission on matters associated with the Elections.

Status of the Current Registration Exercise

The registration exercise is being carried out in a satisfactory manner. Our latest Continuous Registration Report dated 13.02.2006, a copy of which is attached hereto, will show that at this time we have realized an achievement rate of about 97% of our achievement target set for the period covered. We have been implementing strategic actions which have resulted in significant improvement in the completion of verification transactions (we are now at a completion rate of 89%) – an aspect of the registration exercise which used to be cause for worry.

Manual for the Conduct of Claims and Objections

GECOM's Secretariat has completed the development of a Manual for the conduct of the Claims and Objections exercise. This document, which is not very different from the Manual that was used for the 2001 elections, will be used in the training of staff to conduct Claims and Objections.

Establishing Offices for Claims and Objections

The Secretariat has already commenced the identification of suitable locations for the establishment of 68 Offices to be used for Claims and Objections. The initial intention is to use NDC Buildings as much as possible. The 68 Offices will be used for this purpose in addition to the existing Registration Offices.

Verification of the 2001 OLE/Fingerprint Scanning and Cross Matching

Recognizing the need to keep all of our stakeholders abreast with developments pertaining to the proposed (inked) fingerprint scanning exercise, and verification of the 2001 Official List of Electors (OLE), the Guyana Elections Commission takes this opportunity to provide an update on both of these matters.

1. Fingerprinting Exercise to be conducted by the Electoral Office of Jamaica (EOJ)

In continuation of the Commission's efforts aimed at verifying the 2001 Official List of Electors, a GECOM team led by Dr. Surujbally visited Jamaica to confirm whether the EOJ was in possession of technology that would allow for the use of registrants' scanned fingerprints to be cross-referenced. Having been told during this that the technology had recently been improved to allow even partial prints from the MRCs to be used to generate a database for the purpose of cross-referencing them to detect multiple registrations, GECOM took the decision to invite the EOJ to observe the prints in GECOM's possession to determine whether they could be used accordingly.

This led to a three-day visit to GECOM by a three-member team led by Mr. Danville Walker, Director of Elections (EOJ). The team was here to find out whether the fingerprints stored on GECOM's Master Registration Cards (MRCs) could be used for electronic cross referencing. During the visit, the team held extensive talks with senior staff of GECOM's Secretariat. It also visited some Registration Offices to observe the manner in which fingerprinting is currently being done. Being satisfied that the inked fingerprints which GECOM possesses could be used for the purpose intended, the EOJ team was requested to submit a proposal to GECOM.

GECOM, having received the EOJ's proposal immediately commenced sourcing of the funds required for implementation of the (inked) fingerprint scanning exercise. Funding has been guaranteed between the Donor Community and the Government of Guyana. A contract, which is soon to be signed between GECOM and the EOJ thereby paving the way for the commencement of the exercise, is currently being fine tuned between GECOM, the EOJ and the Donor Community with a view to ensuring mutual satisfaction with regards to the objective of the exercise.

2. Verification of the 2001 Official List of Electors (OLE) and Addendum

GECOM's Secretariat has developed a draft 7-step methodology to be used in verification of the 2001 Official List of Electors. This methodology involves the following:-

STEP 1

- (i) Copy the records for those persons appearing on the 2001 OLE to the new Database.

- (ii) A Cyclic Redundancy Checksum (CRC) comparison exercise will be carried out to ensure that these persons' data have been copied intact.

STEP II

Apply the transactions from the Addendum to the new Database in Step 1.

STEP III

Check the text data stored in the MIDI system against the records held in the new Database. This will produce a list of all the corrections made directly in the MIDI system that are not reflected in the 2001 OLE. This list will be reviewed before these corrections are applied to the new Database.

STEP IV

Apply the list of deaths to the new Database, based on the recommendation from GRO.

STEP V

Verify the identity and residency of all electors who have given notification of change of address (i.e. the transferees)

STEP VI

- Scan and cross-match the wet prints of those on the 2001 OLE
- Eliminate duplicates, multiples, etc. (A separate methodology must be developed for this)

The unverified registrants will then be the OLE with the following group flagged:

- deceased electors
- verified transferees
- duplicates, multiples identified via cross match of wet prints.

STEP VII

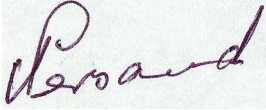
- Draw an appropriate stratified random sample of the unverified on the OLE and conduct house-to-house visits to establish existence and residency.
- On the basis of this sample GECOM will extrapolate the finding to the larger unverified group

While the Commission has agreed in principle to the acceptability of Steps I to VI, Step VII is still the focus of intense deliberations especially since (i) the size of the appropriate random sample; (ii) the methodology for conducting the random sample; and (iii) what parameters including the degree of "error" tolerance should be applied. GECOM and its

Secretariat are currently predominantly engaged in formulating a suitable methodology to be used for conducting the random sample.

Closure of the Current Registration Cycle

The Current Registration Cycle is scheduled for closure on March 19, 2006. This would mean that eligible persons who are not registered by then will not make it on the Provisional List of Electors for the 2006 elections.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "V. Persaud", is written over a light grey rectangular background.

Vishnu Persaud, MCIPR
Public Relations Officer