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News Editor/Director,

### **Interim PAFFREL Report on the Batticaloa Local Government Elections**

The local government elections held in the Batticaloa district on March 10, 2008 took place in a peaceful environment. The incidents observed and reported by Paffrel monitors and by the international monitors of the Nonviolent Peace force in the field were of a minor nature. The voter turnout was in excess of 56 percent and the elections were keenly contested in several areas. The absence of violence and the presence of large numbers of police personnel was a significant feature of these elections.

No incidents of violence and injury have been recorded by 15 mobile units that traveled to all parts of the district. The observations made at 50 of the 51 polling stations of the Municipal Council, 15 polling stations in the central, south and south eastern part of the district and 21 polling stations in the north and north central part of the district indicate that polling was peaceful and free from major incidents (out of a total of 285 stations).

Long lines of voters were present by 10 am at the polling stations in the southern part of the Vakarai. Observers noted that by midday in this region, i.e. Korala Paththu North, in 7 polling stations (out of a total of 16 for Pradeshiya Sabha area) more than half of the designated votes had been cast. Voting appeared to be less brisk in other areas. In the north and south eastern part of the district, more women were observed among the voters. At all polling stations the Senior Presiding Officer indicated that the station did not encounter any problems. This seemed to refer to the absence of serious incidents.

In the areas without serious competition, i.e. Vakarai and areas where the population was mostly Tamil, the situation appeared to be calm. In areas with predominant Muslim areas the electorate and the polling stations were somewhat more turbulent. The public officials including the Police and armed forces at the polling stations or in the vicinity were conducting themselves with courtesy and care.

- In areas with predominant Tamil populations, polling agents of parties other than the TMVP was very rare.
- A very heavy police and armed force presence observed
- Active voting observed in the morning
- IDs were required, but last minute changes (non acceptance of military issued IDs seemed to cause some confusion) discretion used in some areas, Vakarai did not have polling agents of competing groups

Among the many features of the observations, the following items appear to be note worthy.

In the Korale Paththu North (KPN or Vakarai):

- High proportion of votes were cast early, this is related with the fact that fishing is a dominant occupation of the households
- At all polling booths observed, (11 out of 15) only TMVP was represented by polling agents of the TMVP
- Later in the afternoon, groups of young men were observed near polling stations (within about 10-20 m) and they were organizing persons who came to the polling stations to vote
- One complaint of was lodged by a candidate of the Independent Group 1 (EPRLF/EPDP/PLOTE) regarding vote rigging by TMVP in the vicinity of the polling station. We observed a throng that the police dispersed after we arrived.
- SPOs mentioned that the polling was without serious incidents or problems
- Armed policemen inside the polling stations

In Valaichchenai

- the polling booths were very lively, many agents (SLMC, UPFA, Ind 3, INd 4) were observed, heated arguments ensued (after 3 pm)
- A tense atmosphere was noted near polling stations, people gathered at a distance
- We observed a group of riot police moving people away, somewhat forcefully.
- Incidents and tensions were observed related to presentation of fake ID cards and the SPO and election officers were acting decisively, even ejecting persons from the station.

Paffrel was supported by the Nonviolent Peaceforce in aiming to reduce election related violence through independent international monitoring.

### **Assessment**

The entire course of the election, from the time of its announcement, was free of overt violence. However, during this period Paffrel received several reports of intimidation of candidates which is not acceptable in a democratic process. One positive feature that was observed by Paffrel's long term monitors from the Nonviolent Peaceforce was that weapons were not carried in public.

The decision of the TNA and UNP not to contest the elections was explained by them as being on account of their fear of violence. Their decision not to contest deprived the electorate of a fuller range of choice. In some areas there was no real contest and as a result the normal surveillance of the electoral process by the contesting parties was inadequate. Paffrel monitors observed that in some areas there were no polling agents of parties other than the TMVP.

The relatively healthy turnout of voters is an indication of the desire of the people for a change from the conditions of war and militancy and for a restoration of democratic institutions. Paffrel therefore believes that it is incumbent on all political parties to participate positively in the effort to restore normalcy and the democratic process.



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