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Rhodesia



Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

5 March 1980

Dear Michael,

F. A. Nutsby

Rhodesia: Commonwealth Observers:  
Interim Report

I enclose a copy of a letter from the Commonwealth Secretary-General in which Mr Ramphal asks that the interim report of the Commonwealth observer group on the elections in Rhodesia be conveyed to the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister will already be aware of the substance of the report from telegrams. The Commonwealth observers conclude unanimously 'that the election up to the end of polling can be considered to have been free and fair to the extent that it provided an adequate and acceptable means of determining the wishes of the people in a democratic manner'.

Yours ever

Roderic Lyne

(R M J Lyne)  
Private Secretary

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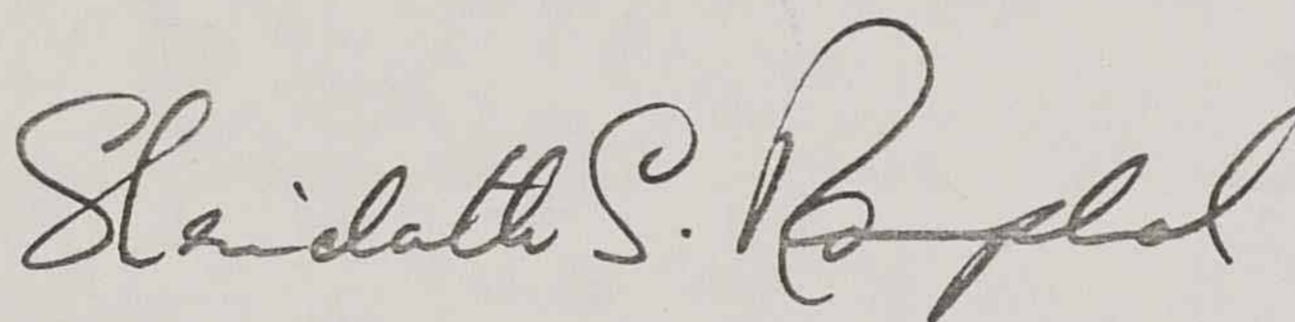
Circular Letter No. 17/80

2 March, 1980

Rhodesia Elections: Commonwealth  
Observer Group - Interim Report

Further to my Circular Letter No. 15/80 of 27 February 1980, I would be grateful if you would convey to your Head of Government by the speediest possible means the attached message forwarding the Interim Report of the Commonwealth Observer Group.

Release of the Interim Report is being embargoed for 1700 hours (GMT) today in both Salisbury and London.



Shridath S. Ramphal

Rhodesia Elections: Commonwealth  
Observer Group - Interim Report

The Group of Commonwealth Observers established collectively - to observe all aspects of the electoral campaign and the elections in Rhodesia and to report to Commonwealth Governments has submitted an Interim Report which deals with matters up to and including the poll itself. The text of the interim report is as follows:

Begins

"The Commonwealth Observer Group, since its arrival in Rhodesia on 24 January, has carefully scrutinised the entire electoral process and, through a programme of extensive and generally independent travel and enquiry throughout the country, covering more than 125,000 kilometres till 29 February, has acquired a unique position for assessing developments, the election campaign, and the actual conduct of the poll. The Group has been conscious throughout of the special responsibilities devolving on it under the Lusaka Accord and the Lancaster House Agreement.

2. The Group recognises that it is difficult, if not impossible, to make clear and unqualified judgements about every aspect of the electoral process carried out, as it has been, in the immediate wake of a protracted and bitter civil war. Various factors have sustained or created conditions where political activity was not always devoid of violence, where freedom of movement, assembly and expression were restricted in varying degrees in parts of the country and where the performance of the publicly-owned media left much to be desired. The suspicions and hostility dividing different sections of Rhodesian society, exacerbated by years of armed conflict were not, and could not reasonably be expected to be, dissipated within a few weeks of the ceasefire. It is a matter of some satisfaction, however, that in a society as heavily armed as Rhodesia's, the level of violence during the campaign has not been higher than it was. In this context, the Group was gratified by the ready response of party leaders to its suggestion, subsequently pursued formally by the Election Council, that they issue a public statement adjuring their followers to eschew violence and to campaign peacefully.

3. The Group considered it important to keep in touch with the functioning of the administration especially in its bearing on the electoral process. While recognising the complex nature of the problems confronting it, it noted with regret evidence of obstruction and a lack of a sufficient degree of impartiality in dealing with the interests of the different parties.

4. The problem of intimidation in these elections has

been of central concern to the Group. That intimidation has occurred is a fact and there can be no doubt that intimidation whether in the form of violence, threats of violence or coercion has marred the election campaign. It is equally true that intimidation has not stemmed from only a single quarter. In the Group's view, certain official agencies have also been culpable. It is impossible to judge accurately the extent to which intimidation, taken overall, has restricted the freedom of activity of the political parties or influenced voters. In many cases the Group found from personal observation in the field that charges of intimidation were being exaggerated or were being made in deliberately vague and general terms, inspired by considerations of political expediency. It also found that various political parties were indeed able to campaign actively in some of the areas where it was alleged that they were unable to do so. In any event, the limitations and constraints were to a degree overcome by the party political broadcasts on radio and television and the extensive use of advertising. The Group strongly cautioned the authorities against banning parties or candidates or disenfranchising voters in particular areas and it was relieved that, in the event, none of these major disqualifications was applied. The Group believes that the political parties have had, by and large, an adequate, if not entirely unrestricted, opportunity to solicit the support of the electorate.

5. The Group was impressed by the very high degree of political awareness among the people in both urban and rural areas. They showed a lively appreciation of the issues and a keen involvement in the election process and the future destiny of their country. The overwhelming urge for peace in freedom and dignity was throughout a key factor, and with the passage of time, the Group was encouraged to see a palpable strengthening of the forces working for peace and reconciliation. This was a sentiment strongly urged by the political leadership and widely echoed by the population. The beginning made in the process of integrating the armies was its most hopeful augury.

6. In addressing itself to the question of whether the election process has been entirely free and fair, the Group believes it would be unrealistic and misleading to apply conventional yardsticks in assessing a situation which is as unique and unparalleled as that in Rhodesia. For it is impossible to ignore the deep wounds left by the war, the burden of Rhodesia's troubled history and the unprecedented character of the Lancaster House Agreement itself. While recognising deficiencies in the implementation of the Agreement, the Group has taken careful note of the fact that none of the principal political leaders it met judged these to be such as to undermine the validity of the election. The collective

experience of the Group, based on conversations with many thousands of people in all parts of the country, revealed a high level of awareness among the great majority of the electorate that their vote was and would remain secret. This assurance would have served to attenuate the effects of intimidation on the voters' freedom of choice.

7. Having regard to all these factors, as well as the use of the party list system, it is the unanimous conclusion of the Commonwealth Observer Group that the election up to the end of polling can be considered to have been free and fair to the extent that it provided an adequate and acceptable means of determining the wishes of the people in a democratic manner. This view is fortified by the high turnout, and the orderly and manifestly relaxed manner in which such a large percentage of voters went to the polls.

8. While the counting is not yet complete, it is the view of the Group that the organisational aspects of the election, including the arrangements for the polling, have on the whole been carried out efficiently and fairly in what were undoubtedly difficult circumstances. The 63-strong Group observed polling in 409 out of the 657 polling stations, and was present in all parts of the country while many hundreds of thousands cast their votes. Despite such comprehensive coverage, the number of deficiencies observed by the Group in the actual conduct of the poll was insignificant and will not affect the outcome in any material way. The Group is continuing to observe the final stages of the election process but so far has not discerned any significant anomalies which might vitiate its present conclusions.

9. A detailed and final report will be issued as soon as possible after the conclusion of the count.

Salisbury, 1 March 1980"

Ends

The Observer Group's Interim Report is a unanimous Report signed by all eleven members of the Group. Their full and final report will be issued after the electoral process has ended with the declaration of the result, and I hope will be transmitted to you by mid-March.

Commonwealth Secretariat  
2 March, 1980