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## MIDDAY STATEMENT FROM ELECTION RESOURCE CENTER (ERC) AND ZIMBABWE ELECTION SUPPORT NETWORK (ZESN)

The Election Resource Centre (ERC) and the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) have trained and deployed accredited observers to every constituency, district and province in the country for the 2023 harmonised elections. This Midday Statement is based on reports received from these observers although it is provisional in nature as the data collection process is ongoing. While this update is focused only on the opening of polls, ERC and ZESN's overall assessment of the 2023 harmonised elections will be based on the entire electoral cycle processes and not just Election Day observations. ERC and ZESN intend to issue a preliminary statement on the conduct of voting and counting on the afternoon of Thursday 24 August 2023 at the Holiday Inn in Harare.

ERC and ZESN have observed that where their observers are deployed, no incidents were recorded, except the widespread cases of intimidation of voters through the setting up of exit polls and recording names by ZANU-PF.

Furthermore, ERC and ZESN observed the late opening of polling stations, which is disproportionately concentrated in urban centers, particularly Harare and Bulawayo Metropolitan Provinces, and represents a substantial voting population. At least 11% of observers across the country reported that their polling station did not open until after 8 am, with 7% reporting significant delays where the polling station had not yet opened by 9am, over two hours after the official opening time. The ZEC has acknowledged the late openings in polling, attributed to missing local authority ballot papers. While the ZEC has announced that stations afflicted by delays may stay open late after the traditional 7 pm closing time, this problem nonetheless seriously disenfranchises voters in those areas who may not be able to wait in long queues for hours, or risk voting late at night.

Additional findings from the opening process noted by ERC and ZESN include:

**Posting of Voters Roll Outside the Polling Station:** ZEC's posting of the voters roll outside of polling stations can help support voter information and participation, particularly since some voters have been shifted to new polling stations following the delimitation of electoral boundaries process. However, so far 9% of observers noted that the voters roll was not available outside their polling station.

**Polling Officials:** In the polling stations that did open, the vast majority were sufficiently staffed with an average of eight electoral officials, with at least half of the officials being women. Approximately 40% of polling stations reported have a female presiding officer.

**Party Agents:** The vast majority of observers noted the presence of party agents from both major parties in their polling stations. Beyond the two major political parties, observers also noted agents from other political parties in over half of polling stations.

**Setup Process Overall:** For polling stations that opened on time, observers broadly reported that polling stations were setup so that voters could mark their ballot in secret, materials were present including the ZEC stamp for ballot papers, the biometric voters roll, and indelible ink, and ballot boxes were shown to be empty before being closed and sealed.

**Incidents:** Observers also reported on the presence of ZANU-PF which is manning exit polls and recording names of voters. Observers alleged that the exercise is intimidating to the voters. An isolated incident of a ZESN observer was beaten up in Gutu West, in Masvingo Province.

At some polling stations where ERC and ZESN are stationed, long queues were observed from early morning, with some polling stations not yet opened by 1pm and voters patiently waiting to cast their vote. For example in Harare Glen View 4 Primary School, Warren Park, Haig Park Primary School, Glen Norah among others; Tsvingwe Primary School in Mutasa South, Mutasa Central, Dangamvura, St Paul, Bait Hall and Rujeko in Mutare, Manicaland Province, Baines Primary School and Queen Elizabeth Primary- Nkulumane in Bulawayo Metropolitan province among others.

## **Conclusion**

While observers reported a relatively routine setup process in the polling stations that opened on time, the acute disparity of voting delays between urban centers and the rest of the country raises questions regarding voter equity and access. However, it is too early for either organization to draw broad conclusions on the conduct of the Election Day. Preliminary findings will be shared on voting and counting in due course. ERC and ZESN note that voting is still underway and encourage all registered citizens to go out and exercise their right to vote. Moreover, we encourage citizens to maintain peace during and after the voting process.

## **FOR COMMENTS AND FURTHER DETAILS CONTACT**

Zimbabwe Election Support Network  
Information: +263733703181 or  
Email: [info@zesn.net](mailto:info@zesn.net) or  
[zesn2011@zesn.net](mailto:zesn2011@zesn.net)  
Website: [www.zesn.org.zw](http://www.zesn.org.zw)

Election Resource Centre  
Information: +263 77 243 2646  
[information@erczim.org](mailto:information@erczim.org)  
Website: [www.ercafrica.org](http://www.ercafrica.org)  
Facebook: Election Resource Centre  
Zimbabwe  
Twitter: @ercafrica

Facebook: Zimbabwe-Election-Support-  
Network (ZESN)

Twitter: @ZESN1