

## ZIMBABWE ELECTION SUPPORT NETWORK



### **ZESN STATEMENT ON THE BIOMETRIC VOTER REGISTRATION EXERCISE PHASE 1**

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**2 November 2017** – The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) a coalition of 32 Non-Governmental Organisations promoting democratic elections in Zimbabwe is observing the Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) exercise which commenced on 10 October 2017. The Network will deploy a total of 2000 observers to cover all the Four Phases of the BVR blitz, to date 938 observers have been deployed. With Phase 1 (One) having been concluded on 25 October 2017, ZESN observers under this Phase reported on a number of issues, including the intimidation of registrants and observers, inadequate voter education and mobilisation, challenges with services of Commissioners of Oath who were not always present at most registration centres.

#### **Opening times and Registration procedures**

ZESN observed that at 98% of registration centres where its observers were stationed, the voter registration process was conducted smoothly with registration officials duly following registration procedures. ZESN also observed that 98% of the registration centres opened and closed at stipulated times thereby affording potential registrants ample time to present themselves for registration. At 99% of registration centres where ZESN had observers, everyone who successfully registered had their fingerprints and facial photograph taken and was issued with a registration slip.

#### **Challenges with BVR Kits**

At most registration centres where ZESN observed, the BVR equipment functioned well, however there were reports of equipment failure at some centres. ZESN also received reports that the transition and transportation of BVR equipment from Phase 1 to Phase 2 did not proceed smoothly. As a result, a number of registration centres failed to register voters on commencement of phase 2 on 29 October due to the late arrival of registration officials as some of the BVR kits could not be immediately used because they were not charged. Examples of registration centres that experienced challenges of receiving kits that were not charged include at Nyaradzai Hall in Zvishavane Ward 8, Mberengwa East Wards 3 and 5, Mberengwa South Ward 27 and Nyanga South Ward 28 amongst others.

### **Pre-filling of Affidavit forms**

Throughout the first Phase, ZESN received reports of political leaders including Members of Parliament, Ward Councillors and Traditional leaders distributing pre-signed affidavits to their supporters. This conduct is a criminal offence and violates Section 8 of the Justices of Peace and Commissioners of Oaths Act (Chapter 7:09), which provides that the person taking an oath must personally appear before a Commissioner of Oaths.

These disturbing reports of pre-filled affidavits need to be investigated by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC) and corrective action should be taken against the offenders. It is critical that all potential registrants freely register in this important exercise. Thus ZESN is concerned by this practice which has fueled intimidation of registrants who are given the pre-filled affidavits on condition that after registering they submit serial numbers on their registration slips. These incidents have been reported in a number of areas for instance, in Ward 17 and 19 Murehwa South, Rushinga Ward 4, and at Iminyela Centre in Mpopoma.

### **Turnout and Voter Registration Statistics**

ZESN observed a general low turnout amongst youths and persons with disabilities. The low turnout of persons with disabilities may be attributed to a number of issues such as inadequate awareness programmes and challenges in accessing registration centres. Overall indications are that the Matebeleland region recorded the lowest turnout in Phase 1. ZESN observed that at Sinansengwe Business centre in Binga North ward 4 not a single person presented themselves at the registration centre on 19 October 2017. Low turnout figures were also recorded in Mashonaland East at Shamba Dip tank in Maramba Pfungwe Ward 6, only two people registered on 18 October, while at Kanzire Primary School in the same ward, only one person registered.

According to statistics provided by ZEC, approximately 1,2 million voters were registered under Phase 1. ZESN welcomes the provision of the statistics by ZEC and further appeals to the electoral Commission to provide registration statistics for the BVR process preferably in granular form, disaggregated by ward, sex and age. ZESN also calls upon ZEC to post daily reconciliations of registration statistics outside each registration centre and weekly updates on the ZEC website. Such information will help to enhance transparency and confidence among stakeholders in the process as well as inform civic and voter Education efforts by various stakeholders.

### **Turned away registrants**

In all registration centres, ZESN observers reported a number of cases where some people were turned away for reasons that include having defaced identity documents, presenting photocopy IDs and driver's license as identity documents, not having IDs and appropriate proof of residence, being under age, having expired passports and alien status on IDs. At 100% of the voter registration centres, observers reported that all turned away registrants were duly requested to fill in the VR5 form for turned away voters. As of 31 October 2017, ZEC reported that a total of 32,849 potential registrants had been turned away representing approximately 2.3% of the total registered voters.

### **Role of Traditional Leaders**

ZESN expresses concern over the recent public announcement by traditional leaders endorsing the ruling party for the forthcoming harmonised elections. ZESN notes that such pronouncements are in contravention of Section 281(2) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe which states that traditional leaders must not belong to any political party nor act in a partisan manner. ZESN observed, during the first phase that traditional leaders were issuing out proof of residence affidavits and letters stating that the registrants reside in areas under their jurisdiction. ZESN reiterates its previous calls for traditional leaders to play their leadership role in a non-partisan manner as this is critical to the creation of a conducive environment that allows for the enjoyment, by their subjects, of the right to register and freely participate in electoral processes.

### **Observers denied access to centres**

Some accredited ZESN observers were denied access into registration centres by ZEC's Ward registration supervisors insisting that they first report at the ZEC district offices. Observers were denied access in Zvishavane at Nyaradzai Hall in Ward 8, Lundi Hospital in Ward 10 and Weleza in Ward 13, in Ward 10 of Mwenezi West, as well as at Thekwane High School in Bulilima East. ZESN through its member organisation the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights engaged ZEC resulting in the observers being allowed to observe. ZEC should ensure that its officers facilitate the observation of electoral processes including voter registration exercise as this is crucial for promoting transparency and credibility of electoral processes.

### **Intimidation of observers**

Of concern to ZESN are incidents where accredited observers were intimidated for observing the BVR process. For instance in Chipinge Central, a ZESN observer was threatened and intimidated by the Ward councillor and his supporters resulting in the centre being closed by the registration officials who felt the situation was threatening to get out of hand. In Epworth Ward 2 at the Local Board offices, a physically challenged ZESN observer was forced out of a registration centre.

## **Misinformation**

ZESN received disturbing reports of cases where potential registrants were being misinformed that the BVR system has the ability to reveal voters' preferences on voting day. There is need for ZEC and other electoral stakeholders to amplify civic and voter education efforts in order to demystify the BVR and ensure that voters receive accurate information which will allow them to make informed choices.

## **Creation of a conducive political environment**

ZESN reiterates its calls for the establishment of a conducive political environment devoid of intimidation and violence during the registration exercise and during the period leading to the 2018 elections. ZESN urges ZEC to facilitate the creation of Multi-Party Liaison Committees (MPLCs). MPLCs would be an appropriate platform to elicit the support of politicians in adhering to the stipulated code of conduct for political parties in all electoral processes.

## **Recommendations**

1. The ZHRC and ZEC must investigate the incidents of intimidation of registrants and the distribution of pre-filled affidavits by political parties and traditional leaders.
2. There is need for standardization of operations for all BVR Ward Supervisors with regards to how they relate with observers to ensure that there are no obstructions to the work of observers during the registration process.
3. Disaggregated Statistics of registered voters should be availed on a daily basis to observers and interested stakeholders as a way of enhancing transparency and accountability as well as to inform stakeholders involved in civic and voter education to make appropriate adjustment to voter education interventions.
4. ZEC should facilitate the creation of Multi-Party Liaison Committees that will discuss issues related to political parties, actors and supporters adherence to the stipulated code of conduct during the registration period.
5. ZEC should issue periodic updates and briefings to address deliberate misinformation by some political parties regarding the importance and purpose of the BVR exercise.
6. Recognising the important role that the media plays in electoral processes, ZESN calls upon the media to augment efforts by ZEC and CSOs in providing accurate information to demystify the BVR process and to encourage all eligible citizens to turnout in their numbers to register.
7. ZESN recommends that ZEC engages organisations working with people with disabilities in order to facilitate their registration and participation.
8. ZEC and CSOs should amplify voter education efforts to ensure that the public is well informed about the process and to further reduce the number of turned away potential registrants.

9. In view of the emerging challenges with regards to the proof of residence, ZESN reiterates its previous position for ZEC to put in place additional mechanisms to further ease the proof of residence requirement such as conferring voter registration officials with powers to commission affidavits.

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***#register2vote #BVRZW #usasarire #ungasaleli***

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