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OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Armenia
Extraordinary Presidential Election, 16 March 1998
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Preliminary Statement by the Election Observation Mission to the Armenian Extraordinary Presidential Election 16 March 1998

(18 March 1998) At the invitation of the Government of the Republic of Armenia, on February 14 the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission began to observe preparations for the election. During the pre-election phase the mission met frequently with all candidates and provided regular comment on and suggestions for improvement of the process. As election day approached, OSCE/ODIHR deployed over 200 international observers to all parts of Armenia. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly deployed 12 parliamentarians from eight countries in conjunction with this effort. Additionally, OSCE/ODIHR co-operated with the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Delegation.

OSCE observers visited over 800 polling stations on election day, more than half the total of all polling stations in Armenia. Following the close of the polls, they observed the counting of the votes. Observer teams then followed the results through numerous Community Electoral Commissions and all 11 Regional Electoral Commissions.

The pre-election campaign, although marred by violence in Ararat on 8 March, proceeded relatively smoothly although not without problems. The greatly reduced electoral calendar had a negative impact on the preparation of voting lists, the establishment of lower level election commissions and the preparation of polling stations.

Of the polling stations observed, most had diligent Precinct Electoral Commission members seeking to implement the law properly and to fulfil their duties. However, in approximately 15% of precincts significant violations of law or regulations were observed. These would have called into question the validity of the election had there been a close result.

We regret that this first round of the elections fell short of the standards to which Armenia has committed itself in OSCE documents.

The key areas of concern which require correction before the second round are:

- **Voting process.** This process proceeded well in most cases. However, in at least three precincts, there is clear evidence of ballot box stuffing and there is substantial evidence of attempts to stuff ballot boxes in several more precincts. These incidents will be detailed in the final report.

- **Military voting.** Observers noted problems regarding the military voting process, including directed voting by superior personnel, officers in the polling place, problems with military voting lists, and questions concerning voting by hospitalised military personnel. Additionally, the level and speed of communication between the Ministry of Defence and the Central Electoral Commission regarding mobile ballot boxes for soldiers did not live up to earlier promises, thus hampering the transparency of the process.

- **Use of State resources.** Early in the pre-election phase this was not a problem, but it became one during the last days. There is no discernible pattern of orchestrated events, and the over-zealousness of individual supporters appears to be to blame. However, in the final analysis candidates can and should be held responsible for the actions of their supporters, and we anticipate such leadership during the next phase of the election. Two particularly visible incidents included the distribution of one candidate's campaign literature with customs forms on incoming Armenian Airlines flights from Amsterdam and Moscow and the distribution of kerosene out of a candidate's headquarters in Yerevan.

- **Police and other unauthorised personnel in polling stations.** The Election Observation Mission has a deep concern over the presence of unauthorised and frequently unidentified personnel, particularly Ministry of Interior personnel, in polling stations. Despite definitive orders to ensure the minimal involvement in the polling stations, police and ministry personnel were observed to be present and sometimes actually involved in the vote count. Additionally, some observers cited the unauthorised involvement of municipal officials, creating an atmosphere of intimidation in polling stations.

- **Media bias.** While an early review of the editorial coverage by State media indicated a continuation of the 1996 practice of extreme media bias, steps to correct this problem were taken. Despite efforts to treat candidates fairly, statistical monitoring showed continuing imbalance. State media gave disproportionate coverage to the incumbent candidate in comparison to all others; in the case of certain private media, this was also true for their favoured candidate. It is hoped that the trend toward impartiality, coupled with greater depth of reporting on substantive issues, will insure that the electorate will be in a position to make a more fully informed choice during the second round.

- **Campaign violence.** The disruption and violence at a campaign rally in which eight people were injured, including two requiring hospitalisation, was roundly condemned by the OSCE Election Observation Mission. While the Ministry of Interior reacted quickly, arresting 4 people and sacking the police chief for "failing to keep public order", a repetition of any such event would have a serious impact on our assessment of the election.

The Government of Armenia and the Central Election Commission should take immediate steps to address the problems outlined in this statement prior to the second round. The March 17 statement by the Government is a welcome first step in this

process. Over the longer term we look forward to the continuation of the critically important election reform process which was deferred due to this election.