



**OSCE/ODIHR ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION
FOR THE 16 MARCH 1998 ARMENIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

**Statement by Ambassador Sam Brown
OSCE Special Representative for the Armenian Presidential Election**

3 March 1998
Yerevan, Armenia

The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission to Armenia was established on 14 February in response to an invitation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. We would like to thank the Armenian Government for that invitation, which is in fulfilment of the commitments contained in the Copenhagen Document.

As the principal organisation working to build multilateral co-operation and security across Europe and in the emerging democracies of the former Soviet Union, the OSCE believes that Armenia is at a critical point in its democratic development. This is a country with a long and proud history and an important role to play internationally. However, significant questions arose both domestically and within the international community about the integrity of the 1995 and 1996 elections. March 16 provides an opportunity to lay those questions to rest and to ensure the Armenia is firmly on the road to becoming a democratic society.

To be truly democratic, elections must be universal, equal, fair, secret, free and transparent. They must result in a government that is accountable to its citizens.

In order to assess whether these conditions apply to the 16 March extraordinary presidential election, the Election Observation Mission has already placed fifteen international observers throughout Armenia. They have begun assessing election preparations and analysing the broader pre-election environment. More long-term observers are on the way as we speak. They will be joined by an anticipated 100 short-term international observers who will closely study events on Election Day.

These short-term observers are but one element of OSCE's overall assessment of the election campaign process. This is why OSCE's long term international observers began arriving in Armenia more than one month prior to the election date. Our observers will remain in Armenia throughout the election process, including during a second round of elections if one is needed. While we hope to issue a preliminary statement shortly after the election, we will not engage in a rush to judgement. Our initial post-election statement will be released only after we have adequate information about the entire Election Day voting, counting and vote aggregation process.

Representatives of the Election Observation Mission have met with all of the presidential candidates. During the last several days I have had the opportunity to meet

with many of the candidates, including the Prime Minister. I have also met with: the Chairman of the Constitutional Court; the Foreign Minister; the Defence Minister; the Interior Minister; the Chairman of the Central Election Commission (CEC); members of the diplomatic community; representatives of domestic non-governmental organisations. My comments today are based on those meetings, reports from our long-term observers, and my review of the OSCE/ODIHR Final Report on the 1996 presidential election.

That report contained a number of recommendations for improvement to the presidential election law. Although the government was actively working to implement several of these recommendations, they were not adopted prior to the events, which led to the 16 March elections.

Because of our recommendations concerning domestic observers, we deeply regret yesterday's decision by the National Assembly not to consider an amendment to the presidential election law that would permit domestic election observers at polling stations and in meetings of election commissions. Confidence in the integrity of the election process is a fundamental precondition of any democratic society. We strongly urge the National Assembly to enact legislation that would allow full participation in the election process by non-partisan domestic observers. Sufficient time remains before the 16 March election to do this.

The OSCE/ODIHR also made several recommendations for changes in administrative practices. There is no reason that these recommendations cannot be adopted prior to the presidential elections. In addition, more recent developments have caused us to raise several issues that we expect the Armenian Government and competent election authorities to address during the pre-election period.

Among these recommendations are the following:

- Our report on the 1996 presidential election noted the significant disparity between the coverage provided to the incumbent candidate and his opponents by state media, particularly television. We believe the treatment of candidates by state media can provide an early indication of whether an incumbent candidate in control of state structures, including but not limited to official media organs, intends to use such structures to support his candidacy. Consequently, we will pay close attention to the treatment of all presidential candidates by state television and other state media. We will be particularly interested to note whether state media develop a heightened interest in providing coverage of the routine activities of senior government officials during the pre-election period.
- Article 7.7. of the Copenhagen Document requires participating States to ensure that campaigns are conducted without intimidation by state institutions. This is particularly important during the actual voting and votes count processes. Our post-election report noted the frequency with which our observers encountered unauthorised persons, especially police and representatives of the Ministry of Interior, in the polling stations during voting, and particularly during the vote count process. We believe the citizens of Armenia have demonstrated their political maturity and an ability to participate in election procedures in a respectful and orderly fashion. As a

result, we expect the competent Armenian authorities to clarify what conditions, **if any** allow government officials without specific election-related administrative duties to be present in, or near, polling stations or higher-level election commissions during the vote, vote count and vote aggregation procedures.

During the previous elections our observers received numerous complaints that officials of state structures and enterprises used their position of authority in an attempt to influence voters' behaviour. This is a significant allegation, and one, which we take very seriously. We call on all government officials to take direct action to ensure that such official intimidation does not occur in this election.

- Our previous report noted clear breaches in the existing law with respect to military voting. Soldiers in Armenia's armed forces should, as stated in the existing election law, have the right to exercise a fully free and secret vote, free from intimidation. Military voting should be subject to the same level of oversight by international and domestic observers as civilian voting. Only the highest possible level of transparency can assure Armenian Citizens, and the international community, of the fairness of military voting. All relevant government structures, including the Prime Minister, the Defence Minister, and the CEC must ensure that those articles in the existing presidential election law that pertain to military voting are rigorously enforced. Further, the CEC should guarantee full access to observers, including international observers, to the military voting process. This is particularly important if the CEC chooses to use mobile polling stations for soldiers stationed on the border. This irregular voting procedure is outside of the existing presidential election law, and must be strictly regulated.

- A widespread problem during the 1996 presidential election was the failure to comply with the legal requirement to publicly post precinct election protocols immediately after the vote count. We strongly urge the CEC to ensure that this aspect of the law is followed in every precinct across Armenia, and that protocols remain posted for a minimum 24 hours after the vote count is completed.

- We strongly urge the CEC to quickly clarify the conditions which will govern foreign voting. Specifically, we urge the adoption of a procedure that would end voter registration several days prior to election day, and make foreign voter lists. We further urge the adoption of clear procedures for counting and reporting foreign votes, and for ensuring the integrity of this process.

All of these specific issues have been raised in my meetings with government officials and presidential candidates during my visit to Armenia. We expect that they will be resolved with all possible speed.

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