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MEDIA BRIEFING ON HOUSE-TO-HOUSE REGISTRATION AND RELATED MATTERS

1. Genesis of the 2008 House-to-House Registration Exercise

The imperative to conduct House-to-House Registration was born out of the need for the creation of an indisputable National Register of Registrants Database (NRRDB) which could be used as the basis for the preparation of Electoral Lists that would be commonly acceptable by all stakeholders as being unblemished. Also, it must be noted that the International Observers of the 2006 General and Regional Elections endorsed this logic, and had documented their calls for a House to House Registration exercise to be undertaken prior to the holding of Local Government Elections. They held the view that the preparation of a new Voters' List from the newly established National Register of Registrants is a prerequisite for the holding of Local Government Elections. The Opposition Parliamentary Political Parties were supportive of going in this direction and the PPP/C had not indicated any opposition to it.

With the above in mind, the Government of Guyana, GECOM and the Parliamentary Political Parties agreed on June 14, 2007, to the preparation of a new NRRDB by House-to-House Registration.

It is the expectation of GECOM therefore, that the primary outcome of the exercise will be the creation of a pure and current NRRDB which would be perpetually updated and purified through future Cycles of Continuous Registration and their respective concomitant Claims and Objections exercises. This would inevitably lead to the preparation of future Electoral Lists that would be commonly acceptable by and among all Political Parties and other stakeholders.

The Commission, with assistance from the Attorney General's Chambers, drafted the required amendments to the National Registration Act Chapter 19:08 which were necessary to facilitate the conduct of House-to-House Registration. The draft amendments were, subject to having undergone relevant perusal by GECOM and other Stakeholders, was approved by Parliament clearing the way for the implementation of House-to-House Registration.

2. Work Plan for House-to-House Registration

The Secretariat, upon being so instructed by the Commission, prepared a draft Work Plan including the various tasks with relevant durations for House-to-House Registration for consideration by the Commission. This draft Work Plan, which was prepared in Microsoft Project Format, was the subject of numerous reviews by the Commission and Secretariat before it was finalized and approved. The approved Work Plan for House-to-House Registration put the commencement date for the exercise at January 7, 2008.

Consequent upon the preparation of a Work Plan for House-to-House Registration, Secretariat prepared a relevant Needs Assessment comprehensively delineating the human resource, financial and material/equipment requirements with associated procurement costs including that for computer software and hardware as well as the cost for the scanning and cross matching of registrants' fingerprints. The Needs Assessment, which was prepared for

internal use only, was the subject of multiple reviews before being finalized by the Secretariat and approved by the Commission.

Since some of the financing is to be borne by the International Development Partners (Donor Agencies), this body commissioned a study of the proposed Needs and found GECOM's proposals to be correct and worthy of financial support.

3. Public Awareness

The Commission developed a strategy for embarking on a Public Awareness campaign for the implementation of House-to-House Registration. This strategy involved providing relevant information via all available media, including at grass roots levels, about the exercise. Specifically, notices and infomercials delineating the criteria and necessary source documents as well as the duration and hours of registration were and will continue to be publicized up to the conclusion of the exercise.

The public awareness strategy includes the production and installation of suitable billboards and banners at strategic locations, the production and distribution of flyers/pamphlets, visits to schools, and the publication of notices in the local newspapers. Seven infomercials were produced for publication via radio and television and 50,000 copies of a brochure titled "WHAT EVERYONE MUST KNOW ABOUT HOUSE-TO-HOUSE REGISTRATION – 7th January, 2008 – 4th July, 2008" were produced for countrywide distribution.

GECOM had commenced the publication of advertisements for House-to-House Registration via the print and electronic media since December 23, 2007. The advertisements were published twice weekly in the three newspapers between December 23, 2007 and January 6, 2008. Simultaneously, the advertisements were being published by the electronic media on a daily basis.

Upon the commencement of House-to-House registration, and due to the high cost of advertising, a management decision was taken to reduce the regularity with which advertisements were being published by the electronic media. One comprehensive advertisement continued to be published by the three daily newspapers every Sunday on a rotation basis. The advertisements will continue to be published in this manner up to the conclusion of the exercise. Visits to schools will continue and flyers/pamphlets will continue to be distributed at grassroots levels.

4. Source Documents (Persons Without Birth Certificates/Passports and Persons with Assumed Names)

GECOM is aware that there would be many persons who might (i) not currently be in possession of their Birth Certificates and other supporting source documents, (ii) whose births might have never been registered (particularly in hinterland areas), (iii) whose Passports might have expired and (iv) who might have been using names other than those under which their births were registered. These concerns had led the Commission to have consultations/exchanges with Ms. Priya Manickchand, Minister of Human Services and Social Security, Ms. Carolyn Rodrigues, Minister of Amerindian Affairs and Representatives of the Ministry of Home Affairs including past and present Ministers and Mrs. Greta McDonald, the Registrar General.

The Commission was assured that these Ministries and the General Register Office are working assiduously towards registering the births of all persons who are now not registered. GECOM was further assured by the Registrar General that **there are simple procedures in place for persons to apply for Birth Certificates and to register heretofore unregistered births**. GECOM was guaranteed that such applications would be speedily processed.

Subsequent to the meeting with the Registrar General, the Secretariat acquired thousands of application forms for birth certificates and distributed them among the 23 GECOM Registration Offices to be given to persons without birth certificates in order that they could apply for same (birth certificates). However, this course of action did not produce the desired results, since such persons, having filled out the forms, would return them to the respective Registration Offices with the expectation that GECOM would facilitate the rest of the process leading up to issuance of birth certificates.

The Commission is aware that there are many persons who have been using names to conduct personal and business transactions in names other than that which is documented on their respective Birth Certificates. In this regard, we are informed that the process is neither difficult nor expensive for a person who might have been using an assumed name (other than that under which his/her birth was registered) to obtain a Deed Poll to effect the desired name change.

The Commission suggested that it is essential for all stakeholders and primarily the interested Political Parties to help their constituents (who might find some difficulty in obtaining a Deed Poll) by convincing the lawyers and Justices of the Peace and Commissioners of Oaths affiliated to the respective Parties to prepare and lodge the required instruments of name change (Deed Polls), through Notaries Public at the Deeds Registry.

All potential registrants who are faced with problems regarding the availability/accessibility of relevant source documents must understand that documentation of identity and existence is requirement in a modern world. Apathetic attitude to the important documentation of one's existence just cannot be allowed to continue in a dynamic world. The Commission is of the view that the six months duration of the House-to-House Registration exercise provides enough time for all such persons to take the steps necessary to acquire the source documents required for their registration.

5. Unacceptability Of An Existing ID Card as a Source Document for Registration

The Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) is aware of the public concerns associated with the unacceptability of a national identification (ID) card as a source document in the current House-to-House registration exercise. This is a very complex matter with which the Commission is currently engaged. In fact, GECOM is in possession of an extensive list of reasons for this status quo.

We must recall Dr. Roger Luncheon, Cabinet Secretary's public acknowledgement at a recent post Cabinet media briefing, that "the accuracy of the electoral roll, from which the National Reregister of Registrants flows, has been a historical problem in Guyanese elections and the main issue in arguments across the political divide". Dr. Luncheon had said that GECOM should assure all Stakeholders within and outside of the political divide that its decision not to accept ID cards as source documents for registration is closely linked to this concern.

The decision not to accept an existing national identification (ID) card as a source document in the current House-to-House registration exercise was taken as a matter of policy. This decision took into consideration that during previous (2000-2001, 1996-1997) registration exercises, some persons had been registered on the basis of providing Baptismal Certificates, letters from priests, elders, headmasters, Village Captains/Touchous and Justices of the Peace thus becoming registered in the National Register of Registrants (NRR) and would have been issued ID cards. This had resulted in concerns about the accuracy of the database used for the commencement of Continuous Registration.

In cognizance of the concerns raised about the purity of the database used for the production of the 2006 Official List of Electors, and recognizing the need to guarantee the integrity of the new database to be created from this House-to-House Registration exercise, GECOM in its collective wisdom took the decision not to accept existing ID cards, among other specified documentation, as base documents for registration. This would ensure that only persons who meet the established criteria would become registered in the new NRR and give unquestionable credibility to any voters' list to be produced therefrom.

GECOM, in its efforts to ensure transparency and integrity of the system is meeting with the Political Parliamentary Parties to ascertain their individual and collective views on the House-to-House Registration process. Further, GECOM is collecting data from the field that will reflect the existing level of any emerging problems associated with source documents for Registration.

In view of the foregoing, the Commission's policy decision that an existing National Identification card is not acceptable as a base document for registration cannot be overemphasized. Essentially, this decision is linked directly to the creation of a new NRR database, and future voters' lists, the integrity of which should never be questioned.

6. Progress to Date

Notwithstanding previous and possible future inclement weather patterns, GECOM is convinced that the current pace of the ongoing House-to-House registration exercise will result in this activity being completed by the scheduled end date of July 4, 2008.

This state of affairs is apparent from an examination of the Registration Transaction Report for the week ending Sunday, April 6, 2008, i.e 13 weeks since the commencement of the exercise.

This Registration Transaction Report shows that **323,225** transactions have been completed, and this represents **55%** of the estimated total of 591,297 persons who would be 14 years or older by June 30, 2008.

The 323,225 transactions represent the total number of persons who have met the eligibility criteria, and for whom Application for Registration Forms have been filled out by Registration Teams working in all of the 23 Registration Areas across Guyana.

GECOM has managed to accomplish this level of success despite (i) the teething problems encountered at the commencement of the exercise, (ii) recent inclement weather patterns and (iii) the national impacts of the tragic occurrences at Lusignan and Bartica.

While there was a steady climb in the weekly number of completed transactions since the commencement of the exercise on January 7, 2008, it must be noted that the national state of tension, resulting from the killings at Bartica, resulted in a significant dip in the number of registration transactions conducted during the 7th week as is evident from the available histogram (bar chart). However, as is also obvious from the histogram, the number of Registration transactions rose again during the 8th week.

In developing its Work Plan for House-to-House Registration, GECOM's Secretariat had estimated the number of persons to be registered by upping the number of persons included on the 2006 Official List of Electors (OLE) by 20% to cater for the capture of persons 14 years old or over who would have never been registered.

7. Cross Matching of Fingerprints

The Commission, as part of its Work Plan for House-to-House Registration is currently engaged in efforts to contract a suitable organization to cross match the fingerprints of all persons registered under this exercise to eliminate the possibility of multiple registrations. GECOM has acquired the in-house capability for scanning registrants' fingerprints, and this exercise is now being wholly conducted by the Secretariat. The cross matching exercise will precede the production of new ID cards for all registered persons.

8. Production of New ID Cards

The Commission has taken a decision that, as a legal sequel to the documentation of the particulars of applicants for registration, new national identification cards must be produced for all persons registered under this House-to-House Registration exercise. The new cards will carry new and improved security features, as well as new (sequential) identification numbers. Thereafter, the ID cards currently in existence would have to be decommissioned at a time to be determined by the Commission.

The Commission has already consulted with De La Rue and is currently in possession of a quotation for the production of new ID cards for 600,000 registrants – GECOM has the resources to undertake this exercise.

Strategically, the production of ID cards could only commence after the cross matching exercise to determine any existence of multiple registrations.

9. Local Government Elections

Being cognisant of its responsibility to administer Local Government Elections whenever so mandated., GECOM is aware, based on its experience, that it might be required to hold Local Government Elections in 2008 upon the conclusion of the deliberations of the Joint Task Force For Local Government Reform (JTFLGR). If this occurs, the Commission is confident that with adequate resources, its Secretariat would be able to administer Local Government Elections in a similarly satisfactory manner as it did for the 2006 General and Regional Elections.

GECOM recognised that Local Government Elections is now long overdue, the last having been held in 1994, and that efforts were ongoing to hold Local Government Elections as early as possible. In this regard, it must be categorically noted that GECOM is not a part of the JTFLGR. Nonetheless, the Secretariat had studied the six options, prepared by a Consultant on Local Governance, relating to the methodology associated with the holding of Local Government Elections under the proposed new systems. This effort resulted in the Secretariat developing a document delineating the pros and cons for each option. This document was shared with the Political Parties in a move to help in the deliberations of the Joint Task Force of Local Government Reform.

At this stage of the deliberations of the Joint Task Force of Local Government Reform, GECOM understands that PPP/C and the PNCR have reached agreement on the methodology under which the Local Government Elections would be conducted. Be that as it may, it must be emphasized that, in the end, it would be the Political Parties and not GECOM which would decide what format they would prefer for the Local Government Elections, and it is expected that they will inform the Commission accordingly.

10. Claims and Objections for Local Government Elections

In the event of the outstanding matters being resolved by the Joint Task Force for Local Government Reform, in time for the holding of Local Government Elections by the end of 2008, the Commission will have to implement the legally mandated Claims and Objections exercises. This mechanism would provide the opportunity for persons(18 years and over by the relevant qualifying date) not captured under House-to-House Registration to apply for registration and inclusion on the relevant List of Electors providing that they meet the required criteria.

11. Meetings with Political Parties

GECOM, in keeping with its policy of transparency and inclusivity, invited all of the Parliamentary Political Party to meetings to be briefed on the status of the current House-to-House Registration exercise being undertaken by the Commission, and to provide them with the opportunity to raise any relevant concerns which they might have. Accordingly, the Commission has already met with the People's Progressive Party/Civic, and is to meet with the People's National Congress Reform (PNCR) on Tuesday, Aril 15, 2008. Consequent upon having met with all of these Parties, the Commission will be holding another Media Conference to provide information specific to the nature of the relevant discussions.

12. 2ND Cycle of Continuous Registration

In the event of Local Government Elections not coming on stream during 2008, the Commission, consequent upon the conclusion of House-to-House Registration on July 4, 2008, will move to implement the 2nd Cycle of Continuous Registration. This would provide the opportunity for persons 14 years and over who were not registered during House-to-House Registration to apply for registration providing that they meet the required criteria

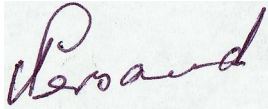
This 2nd Cycle of the Continuous Registration process embarked upon prior to the 2006 elections, and consecutive Cycles, would become a routine process for updating/sanitizing the National Register of Registrants during the years running up to the next General and Regional Elections due in 2011 and thereafter.

13. Encouraging the Support of the Media

GECOM recognises that, with their far reaching influence, the media could shape the manner in which information is disseminated and absorbed at the local and international levels. GECOM further recognizes that the editorial policies of every media organization could only be determined by that organization. However, the Commission believes that the editorial policies of every media organization must never depart from the basic principles of journalistic best practices.

Media organizations must always keep in mind that GECOM is the singular constitutional organization that holds responsibility for the most important tile in the mosaic of democracy i.e. elections, and that any effort to besmirch the image of the Commission could result in disastrous outcomes.

The publication of perceptions, rumours, half truths and total falsehoods about GECOM and its work can only be seen as attempts to undermine the integrity of GECOM, and this can never serve the national good. It is in this regard that the Commission invites all media organizations and operatives to revisit the spirit and intent of the Media Codes of Conduct for the 2001/206 General and Regional Elections and conduct themselves accordingly. By so doing, the media in Guyana would have contributed towards the successful completion of this House-to-House Registration exercise and future tasks to be undertaken by GECOM.



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