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Background:

Electoral observation is defined as a group of activities and specific proceedings designed to monitor every stage of the electoral process, which is fundamental for the transition and consolidation of democracy. The presence of an electoral observation mission (EOM) assists in defining elections as free and fair, but most importantly it helps to promote an environment of trust between voters, political parties, electoral authorities as well as governmental and non-governmental authorities (OAS/UPD-EOM 2003).

The Organization of American States (OAS) has been monitoring elections and sending electoral observation missions (EOM) since 1962 upon the request and invitation of member states. In the specific case of the November 9 elections, the government of Guatemala invited the OAS to observe the electoral process and signed an agreement guaranteeing the immunity and privileges of its observers. The OAS also signed another agreement with the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), which outlined the guidelines of electoral observation.

The Guatemala 2003 Electoral Observation Mission, led by former President of Peru Valentín Paniagua, arrived in Guatemala on July 10, 2003, with the main objective of monitoring every stage of the electoral process (i.e. registry of voters and candidates, voting on election day and counting of votes). On November 9, the general elections for president, vice-president, deputies for Congress and the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN), mayors and municipal councils were carried out with a significant participation of the citizenry, demonstrating Guatemala's to democracy.

Fieldwork / Observations:

Department: Chiquimula

Municipalities visited: Camotán, Concepción Las Minas, Chiquimula, Esquipulas, Ipala, Jocotán, Olopa, San Jacinto, San José Larada, San Juan Hermita, Quetzaltepeque.

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- ❖ November 5: Visited various municipalities and met with members of the municipal councils and the sub-delegations of the TSE to enquire about the materials and the preparations for election day.
- ❖ November 6: Witnessed the accreditation of national observers (Mirador Electoral). Attended the closure of the electoral campaigns of Alvaro Colom of the *National Unity of Hope* (UNE) in central park Chiquimula and of Efraín Ríos Montt of the *Guatemalan Republican Front* (FRG) in the village of Maraxcó, Chiquimula.

- ❖ November 7: People were transported from small villages to the city and were provided food and shelter by the leading political contenders, namely the *Grand National Alliance* (GANA), UNE and the FRG.
- ❖ November 8: Met with European Union observers
- ❖ November 9 (Election Day): Preparation and opening of polling stations proceeded as planned and voting started on schedule (7:00 am). There was significant participation of the citizenry, which in part caused the delay of the process. Almost every polling station had active participation of party representatives. National observers from the *Procuraduria de Derechos Humanos* (PDH), *Mirador Electoral* and the *Universidad de San Carlos* (USAC) were present as well as police officers. The most common concerns during election day were:
 1. confusion with the ballots for president and deputies for the PARLACEN - similarities in colour (white and grey)
 2. opening and closing hours of voting centres
 3. indelible ink and the toilet paper provided with the electoral materials
 4. a few cases of "dubious" identifications
 5. problems with the electoral registry.
 6. disturbances in the municipality of Jocotán – trucks displaying propaganda for the FRG, which had transported sympathizers to the voting centres, blocked the road to prevent the mobilization of sympathizers of other parties. The national police apprehended the drivers and impounded one of the trucks.
 7. As a result of the slowness of the process, there were verbal clashes, particularly at the time of closing the voting centres, between the voters and police for fear of not being allowed to vote.

After the last voter was allowed to cast his/her vote, each polling station began counting the votes. Though each observer was responsible for a voting centre (one in Ipala and two in Chiquimula), which included up to 11 polling stations, at the time of the quick count the observer was responsible for the results of only one station. Out of the three polling stations in the different centres, only one had difficulties during the quick count – 3 ballots were missing.

On the morning of November 10, members of the departmental (provincial) council were still validating votes from the various municipalities. Everything up to that point seemed to be proceeding in order.

Recommendations:

- ❖ Provide better training for national and international observers, particularly pertaining to their role during election day
- ❖ Reduce the number of voters per polling station to avoid agglomeration and confusion
- ❖ Increase number of polling stations to expedite voting process
- ❖ Ensure that all electoral information (i.e. materials, hour of closing centres) is disseminated equally throughout the country and ensure that it reaches all voting centres.