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EOM-OAS GUATEMALA 2003 Final Report (Second round) December 26-30, 2003

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Department: Chiquimula

Municipalities Visited: Chiquimula, Esquipulas, Jocotán, Olopa, San Jacinto, San Juan Ermita, Quetzaltepeque

For the second round of the Guatemalan elections, the number of international observers accredited to the Electoral Observation Mission of the Organization of American States (EOM-OAS) decreased to 75 from 165 observers during the first round on November 2003. Nevertheless, on December 28, 22 departments (provinces) were monitored by international observers, including those accredited to the European Union, as well as national observers, namely from the Mirador Electoral, Centro de Acción Legal y Derechos Humanos (CALDH), Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos (PDH) and volunteers from the University of San Carlos.

Prior to the Sunday elections, the electoral atmosphere was calm and in order. On December 27, in spite of the holiday feeling on the streets, Guatemalans waited with anticipation the moment to exercise their right to vote. Members of the national police were dispersed throughout the department (province) of Chiquimula and the rest of the country in preparation for the presidential elections, which were being contested by the candidate of the *Grand National Alliance* (GAN), Oscar Berger, and the candidate of the *National Unity of Hope* (UNE), Alvaro Colom.

On election day, all polling stations were opened at 7 a.m. and though participation was not massive, as compared to the first round on November 9, Guatemalans went out to elect a new president. Also, in comparison with the first round, the second round of the presidential elections was more organized. The voting centres that were visited on December 28 (18 in total) fulfilled the basic voting procedures of opening on time and providing guidance to voters. Similarly, the members of the polling stations, of which 75 were visited, were up-to-date about the changes that the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) made to avoid the inconveniences of the first round and to speed up the electoral process. For the second round, the TSE eliminated the polling stations where voters who did not appear on the voter registry could be added manually and sent reminders to voters with the name of their voting centre and the number of the polling station, marking a important difference in the swiftness of the process.

The promptness of the process can also be attributed to the fact that there was only one ballot, as opposed to four during the first round, avoiding long line-ups and crowds in front of polling stations, which in some centres was interpreted as lack of participation. However, voter participation in the centres that were visited was approximately 52 per cent with a visible participation of women, the elderly and people with disabilities (i.e. mute, people in wheel chair and with difficulties walking).

At closing time¹, the electoral process proceeded as planned. Once the voting centres were closed, each polling station began counting the ballots, which was closely monitored by the party representatives (2 from GANA and 1 from UNE) and the observers (both national and international) who were present at the time. The results were tabulated with out any problems and at approximately 10 p.m. on December 28 the TSE was broadcasting the first preliminary results, highlighting an important lead for Oscar Berger of the GANA.

In general, the presidential elections of December 28 could be described as a success for the Guatemalan people because they demonstrated their willingness to participate and exercise their civic duty in a peaceful way. At the time of writing this report, no major incidents had been reported and aside from a few voters who did not appear on the registry list (an estimate of 5 people per centre visited), one case of duplicated id number and technical computer problems, there were no denunciations or any major inconveniences during the electoral process. Now that the elections are over, the biggest challenge – that of governing Guatemala – lays ahead for the new president.

Recommendations for future EOMs

- Provide better training for observers (i.e. procedure guidelines)
- Improve the communication and coordination between the observers and the mission before and after the elections

¹ The official closing time was 6 p.m., but many voting centres throughout the country closed at 5 p.m. as a result of the reduced participation and problems with electricity. In Chiquimula, all voting centres closed at 5 p.m. as part of a decision taken by the Departmental Council during the first round of the elections. This decision was also applied in the first round, but because participation was greater, centres remained opened until 6 p.m.