

Press Briefing Notes – Deputy Secretary General  
Dr. Josephine OJiambo (Political)

Thank you.

First of all, I wish to thank the Government and people of Trinidad and Tobago and the Elections and Boundaries Commission for their warm welcome and hospitality in hosting the Commonwealth Electoral Network this week.

I bring warm greetings from our Commonwealth Secretary-General, Right Honourable Patricia Scotland QC.

It is an honour to be here today, beside Mr Ahmed Issack Hassan, Chairman of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission of Kenya – and also Mr Mark Ramkerrysingh, Chairman of the Elections and Boundaries Commission of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr Hassan has ably served the Commonwealth Electoral Network as Chair since the last CEN Biennial Conference in Nairobi, and I thank him for his service and stewardship.

And with the hosting of the 2016 Commonwealth Electoral Network's Biennial Conference this week in Port of Spain, Mr Ramkerrysingh now has the distinct privilege of taking over the CEN's Chairmanship.

The Commonwealth Electoral Network was first endorsed by Heads of Government at their Meeting in 2009 and launched at a pan-Commonwealth Conference of Election Management Bodies in Ghana in May 2010.

The Network seeks to draw upon the expertise of those who play an integral role in the exercise of democracy: the staff and commissioners of election management bodies.

Of course, this is just the second of two major Commonwealth conferences Trinidad and Tobago has hosted in the past decade.

Six and a half years ago, Port of Spain played host to the 2009 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

It was an historic meeting on several counts and I wish to – briefly – draw attention to two of these: Firstly, the meeting resulted in a climate change declaration which demonstrated the resolve of Commonwealth governments to come together and galvanise global action on this important issue.

Secondly, the Heads' final declaration – the Trinidad and Tobago Affirmation of Commonwealth Values and Principles - became the precursor to the Commonwealth Charter, which recognises "the inalienable right of the individual to participate in democratic processes, in particular through free and fair elections, shaping the society in which they live."

The 2016 Biennial Conference of the Commonwealth Electoral Network, which opens today, promises to be an equally historic meeting.

At this conference, electoral management bodies from across the Commonwealth will discuss the mechanics of modern democracy – how elections are conducted.

One of the key strengths of the Commonwealth is that it converts principles and policy into practical action on the ground.

Just as the 2009 Heads of Government Meeting resulted in the Affirmation, we expect this Commonwealth Electoral Network conference to initiate the development of a set of essential Commonwealth-wide principles to enhance democracy.

In this way, the conference marks an important milestone in efforts to enhance the Commonwealth's democratic culture and to provide a service to our citizens, building on the Commonwealth's reputation as a leader in promoting democracy globally, for example through our electoral observer missions.

It is difficult to understate the critical role that electoral management bodies – or election commissions – play to national wellbeing.

These bodies are the guardians of our democracy, who we trust at election time to manage a democratic process and oversee a credible result with officials elected who represent the will of the people.

During the Commonwealth Electoral Network's conference in Port of Spain – the fourth such conference – participants will address the contemporary priorities and challenges faced by electoral management bodies, such as ensuring equal access for all, including women and minority groups, the regulation of election campaign finance, and managing the power of incumbent governments.

Delegates will also receive presentations by alumni of the Commonwealth's successful Junior Election Professionals initiative, which over the last three years has been strengthening the expertise of the next generation of electoral administrators.

We will also look at emerging issues such as the use of new technologies including social media.

This conference, which at its core is about peer to peer collaboration and improving understanding, will lead to common agreement on the practicalities of election management – converting principles into action.

For example, there are five practical knowledge products which will be peer reviewed at the conference and will result in Commonwealth standards in election management – they include a Compendium of

Good Electoral Practices, and Good Practice Guides on Voter Registration, Managing the Power of Incumbency, New Media and the Independence of Electoral Management Bodies.

Of course, the Commonwealth way is not about prescribing a one-size-fits-all approach for elections.

No Commonwealth country has reached an end point in its democratic journey. The specific characteristics of each Commonwealth member country's democratic arrangements will vary in light of national experience and culture – which is a celebration of the Commonwealth's diversity.

We look forward to hearing from all those present at the Commonwealth Electoral Network Biennial Conference, to find out what works best for their country, and whether their good practices can be adopted elsewhere.

I would now like Mr Hassan, one of our guardians of democracy, to say a few words about his tenure in office as Chair of the CEN, before handing over to our host, Mr Ramkerrysingh.