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Guyana: Cheddi Jagan Elected President, Summary Of Developments

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On Oct. 5, national elections were held in Guyana. The balloting came two years later than originally scheduled. On at least two occasions during the previous two years, authorities cancelled tentatively-scheduled elections due to reported irregularities in voter registration lists. (For previous coverage see NotiSur, 11/27/91, 12/11/91, 06/30/92.) More than 380,000 persons were registered for the Oct. 5 elections. On election day, voter abstention was estimated at about 20%. Under Guyana's current electoral regulations, voters choose between lists of candidates presented by the various parties. The head of the party which receives the highest number of votes becomes president. The president in turn chooses a prime minister. The People's National Congress (PNC) party, which has ruled the country for the past 28 years, has repeatedly been accused of electoral fraud. In order to promote free and fair elections on Oct. 5, the electoral process was monitored by about 200 foreign observers. A summary of the events surrounding the elections follows: Sept. 25: The ballots, which were printed in Florida (US), arrived in Guyana containing printing errors in the names of the opposition People's Progressive Party (PPP), and the small Union of Guyanese International (UGI). The errors provoked harsh protests by opposition party leaders who feared the mistakes could undermine the legitimacy of the electoral results. Several calls were made for a postponement of the Sept. 28 voting by members of the armed forces, in order to allow time for reprinting of the ballots. Some opposition leaders expressed the concern that, if the PPP were to lose the elections, the party would take the issue of the misprinted ballots to court in an effort to have the vote declared null and void. Sept. 28: Despite continued calls for postponement, members of Guyana's diplomatic service, police and military cast their ballots as scheduled. Reports indicated that the voting process was poorly organized, with some members of the police and military waiting in line for over eight hours in order to cast their vote. Others were reportedly unable to vote at all, since they could not be relieved of duty in order to travel to polling places. Oct. 2: The official electoral commission ruled that nearly 500 police personnel who could not cast their ballots on Sept. 28 due to administrative problems would be allowed to vote along with the general population on Oct. 5. Oct. 5: President Desmond Hoyte ordered the army to restore order after groups of protesters and looters took to the streets. Two people were killed by police during the riots and looting in the capital, Georgetown. According to police, disturbances also broke out in Berbice and Linden. Preliminary results from the voting reported over the local media indicated that Hoyte's PNC was trailing the PPP. According to Hoyte, "the disturbance arose from the frustration and anger which many voters around the country experienced as they sought to exercise their right to vote" due to polling places opening late, misleading information on where to vote, and slow ballot processing at some of the 988 polling places. Oct. 7: Former US president Jimmy Carter, who headed one of the main observer groups, said Hoyte, PPP leader Cheddi Jagan, and military leaders had all assured him they would respect the election results and had urged the population to avoid violence. "The election was free and fair," Carter declared. "The Guyanese people should have confidence in these results." He blamed the rioting and looting on "a few hooligans who took the law into their own hands." Later that day, Hoyte conceded defeat. He called on the population to respect the voting results. Jagan, who
according to preliminary results had received 54.6% of the vote, was declared the victor. Hoyte's PNC party received about 41.4% of the vote. Oct. 9: Despite the fact that the official final results had still not been released, Jagan was sworn in as President. Jagan appointed Sam Hinds as Prime Minister. (Sources: Inter Press Service, 09/25/92, 09/26/92, 09/29/92, 09/30/92; Notimex, 10/07/92; Agence France-Presse, 10/09/92; Associated Press, 10/05/92, 10/07/92, 10/10/92)

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