

Poll watchers hail from near and far

ELECTION observers have become a world-wide phenomenon in the last decade.

With the upsurge in democratic elections, many countries needed help in making sure that their elections were free and fair. Independent observers provided them with a way of evaluating their elections and validating the elected government.

A number of specialist international organisations provide electoral assistance and groups of observers. These include intergovernmental groups like the United Nations (UN) as well as non-governmental organisations like the Carter Centre in the United States.

In some countries the words monitor and observer are used interchangeably. In South Africa each play different roles and have different powers.

In South Africa, the Electoral Act encourages the participation of two types of observers – international and domestic.

International observers will be co-ordinated by the UN but sent by governments and intergovernment organisations.

A number of local organisations will also be sponsoring observers and co-ordinating their efforts.

Observers do two things:

- They provide an independent presence that inhibits people from acting against the law and encourages them to stick to negotiated codes of behaviour.

- They report on what they have seen and in this way assist their organisations and ultimately the election authority to assess the conduct and outcome of the national election process.

In order to fulfil these functions, observers have to be present not only at potential trouble spots but at all voting stations and election activities.

In South Africa there will also be two types of monitors. The IEC-employed monitors act as inspectors and situation managers on behalf of the IEC. The peace monitors act as on-the-ground mediators and crisis managers.

Each of these plays a different but complementary role in ensuring that at the end of the day, voters can go to the voting station confident that their voice will be heard.



ON TARGET: IEC official Mary Burton says the IEC is keeping up to date with its timetable.

Beyond these slim grounds for optimism stands the towering achievement that four years of hard work in negotiations has produced. This is work that continues across the country in regional and metropolitan forums.

We need to remind ourselves what a long distance we have walked; that we did turn away from ruin, turn our backs on the compulsive acting out of hatred and rage – however legitimate it might have been – and devote ourselves to constructing a future for those who will come after us.

Many of the building-blocks of that future are ready to be put into place. Some are quite

simply astonishing, not only in the context of our grotesque past but also in relation to the rest of the international community. Our new Bill of Rights, for example, is the only one in the world that affords protection to the rights of gay people and provides for the principle of affirmative action.

So, it is no rough beast slouching towards birth in South Africa. The centre is holding. And what is about to be born – in the pain and blood that accompanies all birth – is the chance for peace and justice for which so many thousands of South Africans have sacrificed their time, their freedom, and their lives.