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KAMPALA. Election observers have said early security-related pronouncements by the Chief of Defence Forces (CDF) intimidated voters and undermined confidence in the electoral process ahead of polling day.

The observers from the African Union (AU), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (Comesa) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (Igad) said statements by Gen Muhoozi Kainerugaba directing voters to leave polling stations immediately after casting their ballots contradicted electoral laws and had a chilling effect on voter participation.

"The Chief of the Uganda Defence Forces issued a statement telling people that after voting they should go home.

This contradicts the law, and because it came from the head of the military, it intimidated voters," said Mr Jonathan Goodluck, a former Nigerian president and head of the African Union Election Observation Mission.

He added: "The army should not interfere in elections. The army should also not make statements regarding election day."

In December, while speaking at a piping ceremony for senior and general officers, Gen Kainerugaba urged Ugandans to vote peacefully and leave polling stations immediately after voting, rather than remaining in or around polling centres.

However, the observer missions said

the remarks were widely perceived as threatening. They noted that some voters reportedly stayed away from polling stations out of fear.

Internet shutdown raises concern

The observer missions also faulted the government's decision to shut down the internet ahead of polling.

Mr Jonathan said the suspension significantly disrupted observation work, including real-time communication and reporting from polling stations.

"The internet shutdown implemented two days before the elections limited access to information, curtailed freedom of association, disrupted economic activities and undermined the ef-

fectiveness of election observation," he said while presenting the AU mission's preliminary findings.

Yesterday, UCC restored internet access but warned against misuse, saying another shutdown could be imposed if necessary.

The East African Community Election Observation Mission, led by Ambassador Edda Mukabagwiza, a former deputy speaker of Rwanda's Parliament, also urged the government to guarantee public access to information throughout the electoral cycle.

"Measures should be put in place to balance security concerns with the benefits of public access to the internet," Amb Mukabagwiza said. Uganda Hu-

man Rights Commission official Crispin in Kaheru said the internet shutdown slowed the commission's observation work.

While noting that the campaign period was relatively more peaceful than the 2021 elections, the observers said incidents of intimidation and excessive use of force were still recorded.

They cited reports of arbitrary arrests, use of tear gas and water cannons, and in some cases live ammunition to disperse Opposition rallies, resulting in injuries and fatalities. Mr Goodluck added that the main Opposition candidate reported blocked campaign venues, denial of access to pre-booked accommodation and restricted media coverage.