United Nations Development Programme

PRESS RELEASE

Afghan Media Commission monitors election coverage to level the playing field

Kabul, 11 August 2009— Ten days before the Afghans cast votes for their next president and provincial council members, the elections are dominating the news in the country. To monitor election newscasting in the private and state-run media and to ensure fair coverage to all candidates, a five-member Electoral Media Commission has been set up by the Independent Election Commission, the Afghan institution that is organizing the August 20th elections.

Over 40 presidential candidates —two of whom are women— are competing for time and space on TV, radio and in the press. They are reaching out to voters through televised debates and roundtables. More than 3,000 Afghans are competing for 544 Provincial Council seats.

"In a democracy the media are the eyes and ears of the public, they bring the candidates' views to the voters so that they can make informed choices," said Margie Cook, who heads the UNDP/ELECT (Enhancing Legal and Electoral Capacity for Tomorrow) project. "If the media is overwhelmingly biased towards one candidate or another it gives them an unfair advantage. The Electoral Media Commission's task is to level the playing field."

In the past couple of years, media in Afghanistan has grown exponentially and have been very active and vocal during this campaign —at the national and provincial level. The country has a mass media code of conduct in place, and any voter, political party or candidate can report violations of the media code to the Electoral Media Commission.

"In the first Electoral Media Commission set up in 2005 three out of five Commissioners were Afghans," said Sidiqullah Tuwhidi, Head of the Electoral Media Commission and a journalist by training. "This time all five of us are Afghans, and the experience gained in the first election is still with us —as all three first time Commissioners are on this Commission. We are delighted that local capacities are being built. But more needs to be done to build monitoring capacity within the Commission."

Media monitoring is providing Afghan voters with timely information about the performance of the national media on election coverage. At a local non-governmental organization called Insight, supported by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), 60 Afghan men and women are tracking the presidential campaign coverage across the

country on 21 TV channels, 44 radio stations and eight newspapers. Prime-time broadcasts on TV and radio are recorded and meticulously analyzed the next day.

Insight has been monitoring the media for the Electoral Media Commission for over five weeks. Its weekly analytical reports to the Electoral Media Commission are also made available to the public for greater transparency. The most recent report found that while state-run TV favored the incumbent president, another gave more airtime to his rival. The Commission shared these findings, and the offending channels were publicly identified.

"We have a difficult task," Tuwhidi added. "We are taking both private and state run media to task for violations of the electoral media code."

The Electoral Media Commission has also organized six roundtables that were broadcasted on five television and ten radio stations, offering a platform for all 41 presidential candidates to present their plans and priorities to the public.

"Our mandate is to provide equal opportunity to all presidential candidates to bring their views to the voters through the mass media," said Fawzia Naziri, another member of the Electoral Media Commission. "These roundtables were part of our efforts to balance the coverage."

Many journalists are covering elections for the first time. To address the capacity gaps, a local media organization, Nai, has organized media trainings with UNDP support. Altogether, 164 journalists, from national and provincial media outlets, have been trained in the two main languages, Dari and Pashto. They now master specific information about the electoral procedures, including electoral code of conduct, media code of conduct during elections and about the candidates and their platforms. They have also been trained in balanced, unbiased reporting and the importance of independent sources. In addition to the reporters, 40 editors and media managers have also been trained.

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