



# PRESS RELEASE

## Civic education to boost voter turnout in Afghanistan

**Kabul, 14 August 2009** – Increasing voter turnout is one of the main challenges for the upcoming presidential and provincial council elections in Afghanistan, on August 20. To raise awareness about voting procedures and to step-up the number of voters, the Independent Election Commission – the Afghan institution organizing the elections – has enrolled sports stars and civic educators to organize mock polling stations throughout the country.

“Now is the opportunity for Afghanistan to strengthen not only its electoral institutions but also its other governance institutions to better deliver basic services to its people, to improve the quality of their lives, and access to justice,” said Manoj Basnyat, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Country Director in Afghanistan.

Seven days before the election day, civic educators continue fanning out in cities and villages across the country, in cars fitted with loudspeakers to exhort people to vote.

Across the country, the Independent Election Commission is distributing sample ballots, with the names and pictures of candidates, to give voters a feel of what the actual ballot papers will look like on voting day.

Voting day will be the moment to put in practice what people have learnt in mock sessions, such as the one held at Zakia’s home, in Gurwana village in the Bamiyan province, with around 25 women voters and three civic educators. As each woman entered the room her voter registration card was checked – and so was her left-hand forefinger to ensure she had not voted before. The finger was inked and two mock ballot papers were duly stamped and handed over. Now women like Zakia know the process: the next step for voting is to get behind a curtain and mark the ballots in secrecy.

“We will decide who we vote for, not our husbands”, said Zakia. “We are participating in the elections in the hopes of changing our lives and of our children.”

With Afghanistan’s rugged terrains, to get voting kits to provinces as remote as Bamiyan and its neighboring southwestern province of Daikundi on time, dispatches are often made by helicopter – since it would take five to six days by truck.

Other civic educators are working with mullahs to raise their awareness and understanding, realizing the important role of faith leaders in helping urge people to vote.

“The people in my province are concerned about the security situation, but I will tell them to vote because it is in the Holy Koran that you have to consult each other to make the right choice,” said Khiyal Ahmad, a mullah from Logar province participating in one such training. “I will help by giving them the right information. I will encourage people in my province and the villages to participate and vote to select the best candidate. “

Youth icons like Olympic taekwondo bronze medalist Rohullah Nikpa have also been urging the youth to come out and vote in TV advertisements put out by the IEC.

### **Polls run by Afghans**

While the previous election, in 2005, was conducted under the guidance of the international community, this time Afghans are leading the electoral process, through its Independent Election Commission, which has the authority and responsibility to administrate and supervise elections.

“Some people may be afraid to vote, but this voter education by the Independent Election Commission has been very extensive,” said Masood Amer, a UNDP staff-member and an Afghan national. “At least now most people know how important their vote is – and if we want our children to live without fear and have a prosperous future we have to go out and vote.”

The Election Commission has been in the lead on these elections and UNDP, through its ELECT (Enhancing Legal and Electoral Capacity for Tomorrow) project, is coordinating UN partners’ and international support for the elections. UNDP is also providing technical support to the IEC in areas as diverse as voter registration, civic education and media monitoring. The aim is to share good practices from other countries, to strengthen national institutions and to develop the knowledge and skills of the Afghans.

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