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NDI URGES IMPROVEMENTS IN PAKISTAN'S ELECTORAL TRANSPARENCY AND SECURITY

ISLAMABAD – Upcoming polls in Pakistan require urgent steps by the government to contain political violence, produce an accurate voters' list, curtail security agencies' interference in the electoral process, ensure the involvement of all political party leaders, and protect the rights of women voters, an international delegation has concluded.

A Pre-Election Assessment Mission, led by former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle and organized by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), reached the findings after five days of meetings with government and electoral officials, political party leaders, civil society and media representatives, and international organizations. NDI has observed the electoral process in Pakistan since the 1988 parliamentary polls.

Without such steps, crucial parliamentary elections due in January 2008 risk being perceived as compromised and unrepresentative, and could lead to deeper civil unrest and military involvement in politics.

“If the integrity of the elections is seriously compromised and not seen as representative of the will of the people, the nation could face increased civil conflict and the military could become further entrenched in the nation's political life,” the delegation warned in a nine-page statement.

The delegation found that violent incidents like the October 18 suicide attack against Benazir Bhutto in Karachi and ongoing political and religiously-inspired violence could increase as the national and provincial assembly elections approach.

It urged the government, the Electoral Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and political parties to “take immediate steps toward providing a safer electoral environment.”

“The escalating violence and intimidation in Pakistan is creating an atmosphere of fear and threatens to curtail the ability of parties and candidates to freely engage in political activity.”

The delegation noted “widespread concerns among opposition political parties and civic groups that the ECP lacks transparency and independence.”

It expressed disappointment that four major problems identified by an earlier NDI Pre-Election Assessment Mission in May remain unresolved, including the inaccurate voters' list, lack of transparency during the vote count, long-standing vacancies on the ECP, and the lack of regular meetings with political parties.

“While current electoral rolls now contain many more names, election experts have advised the delegation that they are no more accurate, with approximately 10 million entries that cannot be verified,” the delegation found in its statement.

The delegation received credible reports of attempts by intelligence and security organizations to manipulate the electoral process, including efforts to influence local polling officials and convince individuals not to seek their party’s nomination or switch parties.

The mission expressed “deep concern” about the persistent instability and lack of security in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and southern Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), saying it had also received credible reports of threats by religious extremists against leaders of secular and moderate religious party leaders.

Observing that Pakistan’s media frequently carry reports critical of the government, the delegation however noted reports of “disturbing trends” in government attempts to limit journalists’ activities, and a failure to enforce journalists’ rights.

Stressing the need to ensure women’s right to vote, the delegation said it was troubled to learn that all parties contesting a recent by-election in Bajaur Agency in FATA agreed to ban women from voting.

The delegation made 21 recommendations to the government, the ECP and political parties regarding the upcoming elections. Key among them are:

The ECP should:

- develop a formal process of regular consultations with political parties and civil society on election procedures and policies;
- access the NADRA’s database of identity card holders in order to strengthen the accuracy of the voters’ list; and
- publish the final voters’ list in electronic format.

The government should:

- terminate the involvement of intelligence agencies in the electoral process;
- create a legal framework for all security agencies requiring that they be politically neutral and not interfere in the political process;
- take all steps to prevent election-related violence and promptly investigate and prosecute all attempts to disrupt the election process; and
- cooperate with judicial inquiries into the killing and abduction of journalists and political party workers.

Political parties should:

- adhere to a code of conduct and refrain from employing violence during the electoral period.

The government and police should:

- use their full authority to enforce the right of women to vote and the right of the media to cover the elections in all areas of the country.

The Pre-Election Assessment Mission’s full statement is available on the NDI website at www.ndi.org.

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