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DASCHLE SEES LITTLE ACTION THUS FAR TO ENSURE FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS IN PAKISTAN

WASHINGTON, DC – Despite the lifting of the state of emergency and President Pervez Musharraf’s retirement from his military post, Pakistan has done virtually nothing in recent weeks to ensure that credible elections can be held in that country, former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle told a House panel today.

Daschle appeared before the House Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs to report on the findings of a pre-election assessment mission he headed in October for the National Democratic Institute (NDI). He is a member of the NDI Board of Directors.

The October assessment and an earlier NDI mission in May both identified critical issues that needed to be addressed by the Pakistani government to improve the inclusiveness and credibility of the election process.

“Virtually nothing has been done since our first report to strengthen the prospects for legitimate elections,” Daschle said. “Moreover, the negative effects of the state of emergency have only exacerbated pre-existing problems.”

President Musharraf’s shedding of his military uniform “has not undone the damage of eight years of military rule to the basic institutions of rule of law and democracy in Pakistan,” he said. “Similarly, the lifting of the state of emergency is not alone sufficient for ensuring democratic elections. It is only the first of many steps the government would have had to take to avoid a further deepening of Pakistan’s current crisis.”

Other problems cited by the Senator included:

- The severe erosion of the independence of Pakistan’s judiciary and ongoing house arrest of deposed Supreme Court judges;
- New restrictions on the press severely limiting their independence; and
- The role of intelligence agencies and other restrictions on opposition political parties, which do not have the freedom to campaign freely.

He also noted that while the government has allowed the return of two former prime ministers – Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif – after years of exile, Sharif has been barred from standing for a seat in parliament, which diminishes his party’s ability to fully participate in the election process.

In October, NDI’s delegation expressed disappointment that four major problems identified by the May mission remained unresolved, including an inaccurate voters’ list, lack of transparency during the vote count, long-standing vacancies on the Electoral Commission of Pakistan, and the lack of regular meetings with political parties. “If the integrity of the elections is seriously compromised and not seen as representative of the will of the people,” the group said in October, “the nation could face increased civil conflict and the military could become further entrenched in the nation’s political life.”

In Thursday’s testimony, Daschle said, “Only elections that are viewed as legitimate by the people of Pakistan can resolve the instability that has long plagued their country. Robust institutions, an independent judiciary, free and independent media, vibrant political parties, and transparent elections are all fundamental to a stable and democratic future for Pakistan.”

The Pre-Election Assessment Mission’s full October statement is available on the NDI website at http://www.ndi.org/worldwide/asia/pakistan/pakistan_peam_stamt_2007oct.pdf.

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