

PRESS RELEASE

United Nations Development Programme

Afghanistan Country Office, Shah Mehmood Ghazi Watt, Kabul



United States boosts support for Afghanistan's parliamentary elections with \$12 million contribution

16 March 2005; Kabul Afghanistan – The international community's commitment to supporting Afghanistan's parliamentary elections was strengthened today with a \$12 million contribution from the United States government. After a successful collaboration between the Afghan government and the governments of thirteen other countries in 2004, the United Nations is seeking to mobilize \$148 million to ensure a fair and transparent process in 2005.

“We are proud to take this opportunity to provide support for the upcoming national assembly elections, the next step on the road to a full democracy, and to the people of Afghanistan, who proved in the October presidential election their commitment to freedom and democracy,” said H.E. Zalmay Khalilzad, the American Ambassador to Afghanistan.

The Joint Electoral Management Body, consisting of Afghan and international officials, is charged with overseeing the National Assembly and Provincial Council Elections. The lead up to the election will again involve extensive voter registration and civic education.

On election day, Afghans will go to polling stations to elect the lower house (Wolesi Jirga) and the provincial council, one-third portion of the upper house (Meshrano Jirga) of parliament. The national assembly is comprised of both lower and upper houses. For the first time, Afghans will be able to vote for their local representatives in the central government.

The 2004 voter registration and presidential elections operations successfully registered 10.5 million Afghans and tallied the votes of more than 7.5 million people in Afghanistan, as well as an additional 800,000 people in Iran and Pakistan. The presidential elections were widely recognized as a free and fair democratic process.

In collaboration with UNAMA, UNDP and UNOPS, the JEMB is using its experience in last year's election to improve upon the process this year. It estimates that the exercise will involve nearly 8,000 national and international staff, with an additional 180,000 people being employed around election day. All polling staff will receive extensive training by JEMBS staff.

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The National Assembly and Provincial Council Elections are more complex than the presidential election held in 2004. The JEMB Secretariat expects to engage directly with up to 10,000 candidates, design 69 different ballots, print and distribute up to 40 million ballots, and carry out a public outreach campaign that will have many more complex messages than the previous election. The timeline is perhaps the most ambitious ever attempted for such a complex election operation, particularly in an environment as challenging as Afghanistan.

“The JEMB sincerely appreciates the US contribution to funding the Afghan election,” said Peter Erben, Chief Electoral Officer of the JEMB Secretariat. “We hope that many will join the US in supporting the further democratization of the Afghan society through the 2005 elections.”

A high-level donor conference is being held in Kabul today, where the conceptual plan of the parliamentary elections is presented to donors in an effort to mobilize much-needed resources.

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