



Georgia revamps election machinery with international help

Tuesday, 3 June 2003: UNDP is working with national and international partners to help Georgia upgrade its electoral system in preparation for parliamentary polls in November.

A Council of Europe delegation that observed last year's local elections cited many problems, such as the "deplorable state of the voters lists and the unavailability of basic election material," and expressed disappointment that "the democratic process in Georgia has so far failed to match the people's aspirations."

President Eduard Shevardnadze said earlier this year that "fair and democratic elections should be our primary goal," and mandated reforms in the system.

A UNDP project is helping to train Central Electoral Commission staff and supporting implementation of the electoral code, while recommending how the code can be strengthened. The project will also support a voter awareness and education campaign, with a special emphasis on promoting women's participation and overcoming apathy among voters.

"UNDP is providing support for the preparation of the elections so that they can be free and fair," said UNDP Resident Representative, Lance Clark. "Successful elections will not only consolidate democracy but will also play a crucial role in safeguarding internal stability. These parliamentary elections are crucial not only in themselves, but also in laying a firm foundation for the crucial 2005 presidential elections," he said.

"UNDP is providing support for the elections to help ensure that they are carried out in more fair and transparent manner," said UNDP Resident Representative Lance Clark.

To help set the stage for the project, the UN Department of Political Affairs assessed the commission's needs and made recommendations for action. UNDP is providing US\$60,000 of the approximately \$1 million donors' assistance budget.

UNDP is working closely with an ambassadorial working group that includes diplomatic missions of 11 countries, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the UN system, and is also represented on a technical working group of international experts on elections.

The groups are coordinating electoral assistance and monitoring implementation of election laws and timetables.

The ambassadorial group met with President Shevardnadze last month and raised several concerns, including the need to train and certify election officials, as required by the election code, and have a reliable voter registration system. It also cited the importance of meeting election deadlines, transparency -- particularly the immediate posting of results at the precinct level -- and prosecution of election fraud and violence. The Government committed to publishing precinct results immediately after the vote count and placing the results on the Internet.

Mr. Shevardnadze said he supported recruitment of Central Electoral Commission members by independent experts rather than political parties, but noted that this is up to the Parliament. He also said the Interior Ministry would have a complete voters list available by 1 June, a deadline that was met, endorsed computerization of the list, and confirmed Government funding for the elections.

For further information please contact Ketil Ghioshvili, UNDP Georgia, or Sandra Pralong, UNDP Regional Support Centre, Bratislava, Slovak Republic.