PRESS RELEASE

POLLS CLOSE ACROSS AFGHANISTAN
September 18

Polls closed across Afghanistan at 4.00pm Sunday after 10 hours of calm and steady voting in the country's first post-conflict legislative elections.

"Today's historic polls, which gave generations of Afghans their first ever chance to elect a national parliament and provincial councils, drew crowds of calm and enthusiastic voters," said Bissmillah Bissmil, the Chairman of the Joint Electoral Management Body.

"In many parts of our country, queues of female voters were longer than queues at male polling centres. The sight of Afghan women clamouring to cast their ballots and have their say in the future of this nation makes us proud."

Turnout figures are yet to be collated. The 30 percent increase in the number of polling stations this year compared to the 2004 Presidential Elections ensured a greater dispersal of voters and shorter queues than last year.

Polling began slowly after the 6.00am start but numbers picked up mid-morning, with steady crowds reported in Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif; and long queues forming outside female and male polling centres in Kunduz.

In Ghazni province in southeast Afghanistan voters queued up from dawn, and groups of men turned up at polling stations singing and beating drums. In some Ghazni districts female queues outnumbered queues of male voters.

As of 3.30pm Afghan time, 99.74 percent of the 5,272 polling centres contacted (84 percent of total polling centres) had opened to voters.

"With the coming of peace in my country and as an Afghan citizen, now I have the right to make a decision for the future of my own country," said first-time voter Marzia, 19, in Kunduz in northeast Afghanistan.

"My best memory of today is seeing all the people of my country come together without ethnic identities, without discrimination, to decide the future for themselves and their country. Everybody came to vote, even the disabled,"

In Bamyan in Afghanistan's Central Highlands, voters cast ballots for the future.

"We need to build a peaceful society, and then we can prosper," said traffic policeman Sayeed Sultan Ali, 35.

"With democracy we should be able to solve our problems better," said driver Besmellah, 23.

Sunday's elections for the 249-seat Wolesi Jirga (Lower House of the National Assembly) and 34 Provincial Councils were monitored by 781 foreign observers, 10,370 domestic observers and 202,044 candidate and party agents.

The intake of ballot boxes begins Sunday evening. Counting starts on Tuesday, September 20, in provincial count centres.

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