



NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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NDI International Delegation Observes Pre-Election Process in Bangladesh

An international delegation of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) today expressed its hope that all the political parties of Bangladesh will help to create an atmosphere conducive to a free and fair poll. Former U.S. Congressman Stephen Solarz, the leader of NDI's team, said that "Bangladesh's continued economic progress depends on political stability. And the best way to achieve that stability is by conducting an election that is free of violence and intimidation in which the people of Bangladesh have an opportunity to freely and fairly elect their government."

NDI will send a 30-member international delegation to observe Bangladesh's June 12th parliamentary elections. The purpose of the current mission is to lay the groundwork for the larger delegation that will arrive next month. Over the past five days, the pre-election delegation has met with the highest-ranking leaders of the caretaker government, the Election Commission, political parties and other organizations concerned with the election process.

The NDI delegation congratulated the caretaker government, the Election Commission and political party leaders for their efforts to end the political crisis and to help establish the framework for peaceful and fair elections.

The delegation stated that it is impressed by the recent efforts of the nation's leaders to create a pre-election environment that would lead to an election free of violence and intimidation. These efforts include:

- a) permitting the political parties to participate in the appointment of new election commissioners;
- b) commencing the collection of illegal arms by the caretaker government; and
- c) developing a code of conduct for political parties that includes a pledge that they will obey election laws and refrain from violence.

Election Observers

The NDI delegation expressed its appreciation that the caretaker government, the Election Commission and the major political parties welcome international observers. The delegation stated that



international observers can enhance public confidence in the election process. If the public is convinced the process has been transparent and fair, then the political parties and candidates will be more likely to accept the official results of the poll.

Solarz emphasized that the presence of domestic election observers is also critical to establishing confidence in the election process: "International delegations supplement, but cannot replace, the work of domestic observers such as the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) and the Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB). These groups have more knowledge of local conditions and have experience in monitoring previous elections in Bangladesh."

The NDI delegation expressed the hope that domestic monitoring groups would be granted government permission to receive international donor funds as soon as possible so that they may carry out their program, including training and mobilizing thousands of pollwatchers. The delegation also stated that international and domestic observer groups should be permitted to observe all aspects of the election process, including the vote count, so that their assessment of the independence and integrity of the elections can be based on a comprehensive assessment of the entire electoral process.

The NDI delegation emphasized that observer groups must be completely neutral and accredited by the Election Commission. They must not interfere in any way in the election process.

Solarz Congratulates Leaders, Encourages Continued Efforts

Solarz stated that it was critical for the Election Commission to be "proactive." The Election Commission should actively initiate investigations of election law violations rather than waiting for candidates or others to file complaints. He commended the creation of mobile electoral inquiry teams and urged the Election Commission to give those teams the broadest possible powers to investigate and resolve complaints. Solarz also urged the Commission to make every effort to enforce the Code of Conduct during the campaign period. He encouraged the continuation of recent government efforts to recover illegal arms, and he expressed the hope that the political parties would assist the government in these efforts. Solarz expressed the hope that political party leaders would actively encourage their supporters to give up arms, avoid resorting to violence during the campaign period and report violations of the Code of Conduct by their supporters.

The NDI delegation included representatives from the United States, Canada and Cambodia. In addition to Mr. Solarz, the team members were: Richard Balasko, Chief Electoral Officer of Manitoba, Canada; Dr. Pung Kek Galabru, founder of the Cambodian Movement for Free and Fair Elections; Eric Bjornlund, NDI Director of Asia Programs; and Peter Manikas, former NDI Bangladesh Representative. Lynn Heller and Rebecca Kind of NDI also accompanied the team.

NDI is a Washington, D.C.-based organization that supports the development of democratic institutions around the world. The Institute has conducted observation missions for more than 50 elections around the world during the past ten years. NDI has been involved in Bangladesh since 1987.