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For more information, contact
Kathy Gest, kgest@ndi.org, 202-728-5535

AFGHAN WOMEN SEEK MAJOR ROLE IN PEACEBUILDING EFFORTS, FOCUS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS, IMPROVED SAFETY AND SECURITY

KABUL – Significant participation by women in Afghan peacebuilding, continued international assistance and improved safety and security for women were among 13 recommendations developed here last month at a Post-Peace Jirga Symposium of Afghan Women.

Seventy-three women from 33 provinces attended the symposium, which was organized by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and supported by the Canadian International Development Agency. Attendees included provincial councilors, members of the National Assembly from the upper and lower house, civil society representatives and journalists.

The gathering was a follow on to Afghanistan's National Consultative Peace Jirga, held June 2-4, which was requested by President Hamid Karzai in his inauguration speech last year to discuss strategies for ending the Taliban insurgency and civil conflict. The Jirga brought together public officials, tribal elders and local power-brokers from around the country to build national consensus on a peace-building plan. Four hundred women politicians and activists, including a number of women who were at the post-peace meeting, attended the Jirga, representing 21 percent of all participants.

The women attending the second gathering, June 21-22, expressed “strong support for efforts towards building peace and stability in Afghanistan as the main national priority that would benefit all the people of Afghanistan.” Noting that women represent half the country’s population, and 58 percent of eligible voters, they said they “demand to be a party sufficiently represented in any future peace negotiations. They insist on the precondition that peace cannot be negotiated at the cost of diminishing women’s rights.”

Among the women’s other points:

- Continued international assistance is especially important for women as a guarantee that their rights will be respected during and after the Afghan reconciliation process.

- Afghan women seek to connect Kabul and the national level with the provincial, district and village levels so that women can share information and experiences.
- The government should do more to secure free and safe movement of women and devote special attention to thorough investigations and sanctioning of all incidents involving violence against women. They asked the government and international donors to provide more safe houses for women victims of violence and intimidation, and establish emergency phone lines for women in distress.
- They called on Afghan authorities and the international community to assure that more international assistance goes to projects that target women's needs, such as hospitals and medical assistance for women, employment opportunities and helping Afghan women network throughout the country.
- President Karzai should guarantee stronger women's representation in the Supreme Peace Council (only two women have been appointed) as well as set a quota for at least 25-percent representation in the rest of the government workforce.

NDI first established an office in Afghanistan in March 2002, facilitating programs to support the development of emerging political parties and civic groups as effective and viable participants in Afghanistan's political and electoral processes.

The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. More information is available at www.ndi.org.

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