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# Observers prepare for elections

By Kalbe ALI

ISLAMABAD, April 4: A conference held in Islamabad on Thursday gathered representatives of civic bodies, NGOs and international groups to discuss the importance of independent election observers both during and after the upcoming elections.

Prominent national organisations focused on election observation have endorsed using international standards for Pakistan's 2013 elections, scheduled for May 11.

Vladimir Pran, of Democracy Reporting International (DRI), said that the standards to be used by both international and domestic groups "are an extension of the obligations and commitments of Pakistan under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."

Many speakers stressed the importance of independent observers. The Aurat Foundation's Naeem Mirza, noting

that women had been barred from voting in many districts in the 2008 elections, said that "when state institutions didn't respond, observers took up the cause. They are still putting pressure on those who do not want women to vote."

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan is also planning to monitor elections in 56 constituencies considered "sensitive in the context of human rights violations", according to Hussain Naqi, National Coordinator for HRCP Core Groups.

Observation was particularly critical in "remote and backward areas," he said, where "powerful groups" had greater opportunities to manipulate the process.

Several international organisations are also bringing observers to monitor Pakistan's general elections. Observers from many countries facing their own conflicts and instabilities - from sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia - attended Thursday's conference.

The EU is also involved; Hannah

Roberts, deputy chief observer at the European mission's election observation department, said, "We were here for the 2008 elections and we will monitor the 2013 elections as well. We will continue to monitor elections in Pakistan in the future."

Zurab Tchiaberashvili, former chairman of the Georgian Election Commission, said that the relationship between independent observers and local election commissions was critical.

"Without proper and long-term observation," he said, "elections cannot be credible or in line with international standards. Election authorities need independent observers to support the process."

The most elaborate and extensive election monitoring plan has been devised by the Free and Fair Elections Network, or Fafen. On election day, 44,000 Fafen observers will be in the field. Once the votes are in, another 400 long-term observers will continue to monitor the workings of democracy.