

Afghan Youth Debates: Election Body "Fully Prepared"

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Election officials in the northern Afghan province of Kunduz have reassured voters that the Independent Election Commission (IEC) is well prepared for the second round of the presidential ballot.

Hamidullah Baluch, an IEC spokesman for the province, said ballot papers were in place, the number of polling stations had been increased, and staff were working hard across the province to promote greater participation in the June 14 vote.

Addressing some 100 students at an IWPR debate in Kunduz, he said several lessons had been learnt since the initial vote in April, and the re-run would be run more efficiently.

Some 2,500 IEC staff and nearly 100 polling station managers were currently being trained, and 4,300 other personnel had already completed training.

"Previously Kunduz city had 717 voting centres; now it has 828," Baluch said.

The IWPR debate took place on May 29 at Kunduz University. As well as Baluch, the guest speakers included Sayed Sarwar Hussein, a provincial police spokesman, and Mohammad Naim Rahim, a university lecturer.

Hussein argued that insurgent groups no longer posed a serious danger to the electoral process. He said the Taliban's threats of violence were actually proof that they were unable to carry out attacks.

Mohammad Yunus Tawhid, a law student, argued that this view was wrong and that officials had become over-confident about how safe Kunduz province was.

He asked Hussein what guarantees of safety he could provide to voters.

"What guarantees can you give that the Taliban won't be allowed to disrupt the second round?" he asked. "Security officials speak in optimistic terms, but Kunduz has been very unstable recently. Violence has damaged the mental health of young people here."

Hussein responded by admitting that police in the province had been the targets of five attacks since May 5. But he insisted this did not mean the region was unsafe, and pointed out that some of those behind the attacks had been arrested.

"Six men behind two of the attacks have been arrested and they have confessed to their crime," he said.

Another student, Habibullah, asked Baluch whether the IEC would allow staff suspected of fraud in the first round to continue working for the organisation in the run-off. Baluch told the debate that any staff member suspected of an offence would be replaced prior to the second round.

Yalda Yusufzai is a student at Kunduz University and an IWPR trainee.

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